

The 1st Lifetime: We Part Though We Love

01: I'm going to the human world to seduce him

From a time unknown, people passing by the River of Oblivion[1] began to call me the Stone of Three Lifetimes[2]. Thereafter, some people spurned me, some came hand-in-hand and carved on me their romances from lifetimes past, and there were even those who stood bawling in front of me.

And yet, I was just a stone by the Wangchuan riverside. I had neither joy nor sorrow.

I sat faithfully that way by the Wangchuan for one thousand years until I finally formed a soul one day.

All living things were to be subjected to trials of fate, but I continued to sit there harmlessly for over another century until...

My love trial came.

Reading my fortune was a white-bearded priest passing by the Wangchuan. He prophesied my coming trial to the knowing nodding of his head.

I thought he was just making up hogwash.

I was a spirit born from the Sansheng Stone; my soul was that of a stone and my heart was that of a stone. My heart had long been forged into coldness by the perennial darkness along the Wangchuan River.

There was no pain where there was no love. If my heart hadn't ever stirred, then where would this love trial be coming from?

Or so I thought.

But everything always had its surprises.

On a gloomy afternoon in the underworld, I returned to the eternally unchanging Wangchuan from my walk as usual. I looked up. In that

coincidental moment, as if sunlight from the land of the living had broken through the thick layers of fog, the cluster amaryllises lining the Yellow Springs suddenly glistened radiantly.

A man gracefully came forth.

I suddenly recalled the words a human woman passing by me had once whispered many, many years ago: “What a scholarly gentleman, so polished, so refined[3].”

After a thousand years, my stony heart made a rare subtle tremble.

He slowly approached, of course not to see me, but rather because behind me was the Naihe Bridge one must cross in order to enter the underworld. It wasn't easy to run into such a beautiful person, so I thought I should have a beautiful meeting with him.

I stepped forward and softly called out to him: “Sir.” I thought to curtsy to him like the well-bred ladies did in human books. But the books only said ‘curtsy’. They never described to me what specific postures and movements were entailed.

I pondered for a moment, then mimicked the ghosts bemoaning to Yanwang (ruler of the underworld) and dropped to my knees with a thud, banged my head to the ground in three kowtows, and said to him, “What is thy fair name, sir?”[4]

The imps nearby sucked in two deep breaths of cold air. He stood there blankly with some surprise in his eyes. For the time being, he did not answer me.

Any endeavor must be approached with sincerity, for the Black and White Guards of Impermanence's favorite saying was: “Sincerity equals success.” This was how they had always been able to lure the mortal souls to docilely follow them back.

Hearing no response from him, I briefly wondered that perhaps I hadn't knocked my head loudly enough and therefore hadn't shown enough

sincerity. I crawled forward on my knees and, not sparing any effort this time, fiercely knocked my head onto the ground three more times.

It seemed I kowtowed so hard that I sent three waves of shock through the ground. The imps nearby wheezed in evident fright.

I raised my head and looked up at him with a bloody face. “What is thy fair name, sir?”

Perhaps the wretchedness of my bloody face had scared him stiff. He remained silent.

I hastily wiped my face, and in the process discovered both of my hands were damp! I hadn’t known I was bleeding this much. I suddenly realized why he was in such a stupor.

I panicked. While rushing to rub myself, I ended up smudging my entire body with blood.

I looked up to him quite helplessly.

In his pretty eyes was the imprint of my reflection. Then, his eyes curved into a dazzling smile.

Even though I didn’t know what he was delighted with, seeing him happy, I, too, offered him a friendly smile complete with two rows of sparkling white teeth, not realizing doing so was adding to the terrifying look of a bloody person.

The imp beside me, Jia, leaned in nervously and pulled me up. I wouldn’t rise. He caught his breath and whispered to me, “My dear Madam Sansheng! Who are you trying to scare with that frightening face?! Don’t you know who he is?”

Among the spiritual beings in the underworld, my magic wasn’t particularly profound. But due to seniority, all of the imps were respectful to me. They seldom spoke to me in such a tone. I frowned and said quizzically, “Of course I don’t know who he is. I’m asking him, aren’t I?”

Little Yi looked as though he was going to sputter up blood any moment now. “My dear madam! This is Heaven’s...” He hadn’t finished when a gentle voice interrupted him.

“My name is Moxi.”

He extended his hand where I readily placed mine inside. He flipped his hand and clasped my wrist.

My wrist was my vital portal. At this moment, he only needed the slightest exertion to send me to a very horrible death. Little Jia’s and Little Yi’s unsightly faces were becoming even ghastlier than they originally were. Jia quickly pleaded, “M’lord! M’lord! Miss Sansheng has lived here by the Wangchuan River all her life. The underworld is but a humble place; the young lady does not know her etiquettes. I beg you to forgive her.”

“Sansheng? That’s a strange name, albeit somewhat interesting.”

I was still looking at him. I did not feel afraid since there was no murderous intent in his eyes.

He carefully studied me for a while, let go of my wrist, and instead pulled me up by my arm. “How remarkable for a stone from the underworld to have developed a soul. You didn’t know who I was, yet why did you give me such a great obeisance?” I suddenly understood. It turned out it wasn’t that my sincerity was lacking, but that it was too profuse. I honestly told him, “You’re so handsome that I wanted to...” Untimely, my vocabulary failed me. In my panic, I randomly grasped for a word that I didn’t know since when had dropped into my brain: “I wanted to seduce you.”

Little Jia gave me a ‘you’re hopeless’ look.

He chuckled. “What a straightforward creature.”

I was thrilled, thinking it was a compliment. “Then, can I seduce you?” I hastily asked him.

He said in some deliberation, "I've come for my trial, so I won't be staying in the underworld."

What he meant was 'no'. I lowered my gaze, a little disappointed.

"Have you always sat by the Wangchuan riverbank?" he suddenly asked.

I nodded.

"Would you like to go outside for a look?"

My eyes lit up; I nodded vigorously.

He faintly smiled and patted my head. "Considering that I've received several bloody kowtows from you, I can't have you kowtow in vain. Since you want to leave the underworld, I will promise you three lifetimes of freedom. The three lifetimes I go through my trial will also be the three lifetimes you get to have your freedom.

After I return from my trial, you will also obediently come back to the Wangchuan bank, how does that sound?"

There was nothing disadvantageous about his proposal. I nodded yes.

He cast a golden seal on my wrist. "As a spiritual being, you need to learn to be smarter. Hereafter, take care to protect your vital portal." He added, "Those who are stronger won't always be as kind as I am."

The two imps, Jia and Yi, contorted their faces as they escorted him away. I touched the golden seal on my wrist.

"Moxi," I called out to him.

Standing in front of the Naihe Bridge, he held the waters of oblivion in his hand and turned to face me.

"Can I come to the human world to seduce you?"

My question was so earnest that it prompted a burst of eerie laughter from Old Meng who was ladling her amnesic soup.

His lips were also upturning into a smile. "If you can find me, then go ahead." At his last word, he drank down the soup in one gulp.

Without turning around, he entered deep into the underworld. I kept watching him leave, and remained unwilling to divert my eyes even after he disappeared from sight. Little Yi came back from the Naihe Bridge and waved his cadaverous hands in front of me, calling: "Miss Sansheng!"

"Huh?"

"Miss Sansheng, could you have developed some feelings for him?"

I finally turned to look at Yi and asked in seriousness, "What does it mean to develop feelings?"

Yi tilted his head in thought. "However the men and women are described in those books you always read is what 'developing feelings' should be."

I pondered for a moment. In those books I frequently read, the gentleman would meet the lady, the lady then curtsied, the two next conversed in a word or two, and then they would begin to do a number of ooh ooh ah ah actions they couldn't help themselves from. I never thought to ooh ooh ah ah with Moxi, so I really didn't think I was developing feelings for him.

I firmly shook my head. "I haven't developed any feelings."

Yi gave a long sigh and muttered to himself, "That's true, how can a stone develop feelings? I've thought too much." Almost instantly, he stared at me and said, "The point is, it's best as long as you don't develop feelings for him! In this world, there is nothing more agonizing than the word 'love'. This is not to say Miss Sansheng can never like somebody. It's only because Lord Moxi is really someone no lady should ever fall for."

“Why is that? He’s the best-looking and gentlemanly person I’ve ever met.” I paused, then added, “And he has the most pleasing voice to the ears.”

“Precisely because everything about him is so perfect that you should never ever fall for him! Lord Moxi is the God of War from Heaven. Although nothing is impossible in this world, he only cares for the world’s welfare. If his heart is occupied by the common people, will there be any space for love?”

Whether Moxi had any place for love in his heart didn’t matter much to me, but the first half of Yi’s remark gave me pause. “How can he take on something as savage as the God of War post? He’s obviously a very kind person.”

Yi almost sputtered a mouthful of blood. “Kind? But you don’t really believe that... do you?”

When he saw my nod, Yi shook his head and said in helplessness, “When the Demon clan attacked Heaven with an army of 100,000 strong, Lord Moxi led 30,000 heavenly soldiers and wiped them clean. Afterward, he led his army down to the Demon capital and massacred the entire Demon clan; blood flowed like water then. In the past decade, there has been no sound uttered by the demons. That’s because any demon three years and older has been exterminated.”

I had some impression of this event. During that time, the underworld became incredibly overcrowded. The wailing almost ripped Yanwang’s palace apart; the Naihe Bridge almost collapsed from being trampled on. Although these demons were said to have been killed by Moxi, war was in fact a matter of killing and surviving. Moxi as the God of War had the duty of resorting to force in order to suppress the rebels. His loyalties lay with his own clan. Decisive ruthlessness was only natural in battle.

I patted Yi’s shoulder. “Thank you for telling me these things. I’m heading back to the stone to do some packing now.”

Yi was confused. “Miss, where are you going?”

I grinned. “I’m going to the human world to seduce him.”

1 The River of Oblivion is called the Wangchuan in Chinese mythology. It is similar to the Lethe in Greek mythology.

2 She is called the Sansheng Stone where Sansheng means ‘three lifetimes’. ‘Three lifetimes’ in

Buddhist context also means the past life, the present life, and the future life.

3 A saying that means a gentleman’s cultivation of character is like the refinement of jade, taken from The Book of Songs, Odes of Wei.

4 She’s asking for his ‘fair name’ as a man might ask a woman.

02: Let me hear you call me ‘darling’

After I finished tying up various loose ends in the underworld, Yanwang personally placed three seals on the back of my neck, each representing one lifetime in the human world. Once the three seals disappeared, I must return to the underworld and stand guard by the Wangchuan again.

In the envious eyes of other spiritual beings, I donned a white cotton dress and left to the human world.

The human world previously known through books was much livelier and more interesting than I had imagined it to be, but also... more dangerous.

On my third day on Earth, on the way looking for Moxi, I passed by a temple and discovered that it was dedicated to the Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva. I piously went in, thinking to offer my worship. I had only dropped to my knees, yet to finish bowing, when an old yet nimble monk suddenly stepped forth with a razor in hand. He smiled amiably

at me: "Amitabha. Benefactor, knowing to mend your wrongs by seeking the Buddha is doing the world a good deed."

Huh? I hadn't had time to ponder over the meaning behind his words when his razor had headed straight for my hair.

I was a stone – the Sansheng Stone. From head to toe, the most difficult for me to grow was hair. I had stared at it for a thousand years before it finally made a little improvement, yet this old bald donkey had the nerve to shave me! I huffed and kicked him away. Unexpectedly, this monk was actually a martial artist. He easily escaped from my kick.

He withdrew the genial smile from his face. "What are you intending to do?"

"Baldy, I should ask you the same question," I replied dubiously.

He sneered. "Demon, I thought you had wanted to follow the Buddha's way to atone for your sins. It turns out you had come here to stir trouble!"

"Demon? You're mistaken, I'm not..."

"Hmph, I've detected the mustiness of darkness lurking in you from three miles away. Don't try to slink your way out of this!"

I sniffed left and right, but couldn't really sense any mustiness on my body. The fish in the Wangchuan were much mustier than I was! This monk did not listen to my explanation. His razor came at me again. My desire to kill began to rise, but Yanwang's endless reminders that I must never harm anyone suddenly came to mind.

I withdrew my attack, turned, and made a run for it.

The monk kept chasing after me round the entire mountain, forcing me to run till I was out of breath. I just wanted to give the bald donkey a punch and send him to an eternal sleep.

All of a sudden, a burst of fragrance drifted to my nose. I had never smelled such a wonderful fragrance in the underworld. My attention

was instantly lured away. As I drew near, a red sea of flowers came into sight.

The humans called this season ‘winter’, and they called that glistening substance covering the red petals ‘snow’. But I didn’t yet know the name of these red flowers.

After I passed through the sea of scented boughs, I discovered a small courtyard quietly standing on the other side.

Curious, I opened the gate and went inside. After barely stepping into the courtyard, the golden seal Moxi left on my wrist suddenly glowed. My heart drummed as I approached the main house inside the yard. Suddenly, I heard a gentle female voice: “Hush-a-by baby, on the tree top, when the wind blows, the cradle will rock.”

I gently pushed the door ajar and quietly peered inside. A young woman was sitting in bed with a baby in her arms. Upon a closer look, I smiled. That face, that nose, and those lips, wasn’t this a meatball version of Moxi?!

I hadn’t needed to expend any effort at all!

But he was only a meatball at present. He had forgotten his past life and could not yet recognize others. How was I going to seduce him? Or, should I stay by his side and be his guardian until he grew up? I definitely could not let other women, or men for that matter, to take advantage of him while he was still young.

A bellowing shout behind me abruptly disrupted my train of thought: “Heathen, where are you trying to run?!”

Startled, I swiftly dodged to the left, banged open a door, and lunged into the house. His razor flashed by as I saw a handful of black hair falling down in front of my forehead.

I woefully sprawled out on the floor, vacantly staring at that handful of dark hair fluttering down.

“Ah!”

The woman’s scream sounded so faraway to my ears, and Yanwang’s reminder was drifting even farther like puffs of clouds in the sky.

I jumped up, gathered my spiritual forces to my palm, and with Wangchuan’s one thousand years’ worth of darkness, I aimed a strike at the old monk. This strike would’ve crushed his brain, but my sanity was suddenly awakened by the crying of the baby.

My palm-strike veered to the side and struck the beam over the door, giving the entire hut three waves of tremor. I somersaulted out of the house. It seemed as though my strike had affrighted the old donkey senseless. It took him a second before he eventually collected himself. He looked at me, then looked at the meatball version of Moxi and suddenly faced the horrified woman and told her: “The red mole on your son’s forehead portends ominous things to come. He is already attracting such evil even though he is only a newborn. He will surely be a curse to all those around him!”

The woman was scared livid at these words. She held onto her child, not knowing what to do.

I was furious. “Hey baldy, stop it with your nonsense!” All humans believed in the prophecies of these priests and monks. He was going to ruin Moxi’s entire life with his words.

“Hmph! Heathen, you ambushed me while I was unprepared. I will let you learn a lesson this time!”

The razor in his hand flashed a golden light as it turned into a Buddhist staff and headed straight for me. This monk did not have a high cultivation, but the Buddha nimbus on his staff prevented me from looking straight ahead. What we feared most in the underworld was the Buddha nimbus of the Western Heavens.

Overwhelmed, I was forced to retreat.

I didn't think that the fight between the monk and I would last very long. I was a stone – patience was my best virtue. I had believed that after our fight tired him out, he would eventually back off.

By that time, I would come back to stay with Moxi until he grew up. I didn't expect the human monk to be more stubborn than I thought him to be. Demon slaying was his lifelong mission, and perhaps I was the most powerful 'monster' he encountered in his life, he ended up considering killing me as the ultimate mission of his life.

Our battle transpired for nine full years in the human world.

Nine years!

In the end, it wasn't that he gave up on killing me, but that my old acquaintances,

the two brothers of Black and White Guards of Impermanence came to beckon his soul away...

I was hiding so wretchedly in the mountains at the time I chanced upon my acquaintances again. When I saw them drag the bald donkey's soul away, I hugged their long hanging tongues and wept in joy. At the same time, I made sure to tell them to ask Old Meng to give this monk some extra soup so that he would become a half-wit in his next incarnation and live a life of misery.

After finishing off the monk, I primmed and preened my looks that hadn't been primmed and preened over the last nine years. Then, crossing thousands of miles through mountains and streams, I found the small courtyard I had met Moxi in the past.

After nine years of living in the human world, I finally learned that the red fragrant flowers were called plum blossoms.

Even so, I had no idea the timespan of nine years could turn such a beautiful plum forest into this withering state.

I slowly neared the small courtyard as the golden seal on my wrist flickered again.

I hadn't stepped past the gate when I saw a dirty child holding a much taller broom sweeping the barren yard. The rustling sounded so dreadfully bleak.

The child seemed to have realized someone was entering. He suddenly turned around.

What I saw were a pair of clear eyes and a red mole between his eyebrows. My heart clenched up, my hands trembled, and the candies I bought for Moxi dropped to the ground.

"Who are you?" He walked up to me.

I squatted down to be at his eye level and saw my own reflection in his clear eyes.

I rubbed the dirt off of his face with my sleeve and told him, "My name is Sansheng. I've come to seduce you."

He stared at me without saying a word, letting me use my sleeve to wipe his face. I took notice of his raggedy clothes and the bruises on his hands and neck. I seemed to recall his mother wasn't an impoverished person nine years prior. How did she let Moxi become this way?

"Where's your mother?" I asked him.

"Dead."

His direct answer surprised me. Hadn't mortals always cared a great deal about life and death? He... maybe he was still too young to understand life and death. That was the only explanation I could come up with.

"Since your mother has passed away, everything is up to you now. Remember, as of today, I have successfully seduced you."

He remained silent as he watched me. I scratched my head; talking to a child was proving to be a very difficult task. Moreover, the child in question was somewhat reticent and withdrawn to begin with. I decided to use a simpler language to explain to him.

"In other words, I am your wife from now on. In accordance with the rules of the mortals, I am your child bride. But this isn't important. What's important is that no one can ever bully you again now that I'm here." His eyes lit up. I patted his head:

"Let me hear you call me 'darling'."

He was silent for a moment. "Sansheng," he repeated my name.

"It's 'darling'!"

"Sansheng."

"Darling!"

"Sansheng."

"...Fine," I gave up, "call me Sansheng then."

"Sansheng."

"Yes?"

I would come to remember the way he called my name again and again that day, calling me until I answered him. Much later, I learned there had also been a time when he called his mother over and over again to no avail.

Moxi was originally the God of War from Heaven. Although he was only in the mortal realm for his tribulation, he should still be a cultured and civilized man, and so I thought to send him to school.

Not far from where we lived was a small town. There was only one academy in this town. The teachers at this academy knew of the old

monk's prophecy that Moxi would grow up to be a curse to all those around him, and so they were reluctant to welcome him into their school.

I told Moxi to carry a pot of gold coins and circle around the academy. Eventually, the teachers accepted him.

I helped him tie his hair on the first day to school. He looked at me through the reflection in the bronze mirror; in his eyes was a flicker of apprehension. I gently said to him, "You'll be living here in the mortal world for some decades more. It's not a very long time; I'll make sure peace follows you in life. But I hope that you'll become a responsible person and lead a brilliant life through these decades.

Literacy is a must. Listen to your teacher while you're at school. Although I wouldn't call them sages, they will still conduct themselves with propriety in front of their students. Study hard!"

Moxi nodded.

When he came back in the evening, there were some injuries on his face. A red mark here, a blue mark there. "Did you get bullied?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Did you fight back?"

He shook his head.

I dressed his wounds and asked, "Where does he live, the one who bullied you?"

Fatty Wang was the son of a landowner in town. His family was so wealthy that even their backyard was enormous. I looked on in total glee. After I lit a fire in his family's woodshed, a southerly wind timely blew by and flamed it into a big fire.

Half of the sky blazed red.

Feeling that the scene was rather spectacular to behold, I led Moxi to a good viewing place and pointed to the towering flames from Fatty Wang's house as I told him, "Laugh all you want."

Moxi looked at me thoughtfully. "Sansheng, my teacher said we should return misdeed with virtue."

"Moxi, you should learn to differentiate. Your teacher was obviously lying to you."

"It's okay to listen, but don't take everything to heart."

Moxi listened to my words, then slowly issued a 'hahaha' sound.

Life in the human world flew by in the blink of an eye. Moxi was fast approaching his coming-of-age at twenty years old.

Under my very careful education, it was no great surprise Moxi grew up to be a gentleman as gentle as jade. His face and figure did not differ too greatly from the time I met him in the underworld. Because his godlike bearing was uncommon in the human world, and combined with his extraordinarily intelligence, he soon became well-known in this small town.

However, "fame kills people, blubber kills pigs." There had to be a reason why this saying stayed in circulation for as long as it did.

It was a sunny and balmy morning when I was reclining on the divan to read a newly released novel. It was a love story about a couple who had made it through the rough of times and it came with detailed ooh ooh ah ah passages. I was right at the climax of the story when Moxi stepped in from outside. He picked up the cloak and robe I had casually tossed on the ground and put them away, gave me a cup of water, then said, "It's not good to lie around all day. You should also go outside for some sun, Sansheng."

I took the cup from him. My eyes did not leave the book as I perfunctorily said, "Sunlight is like poison to me. It offers me no benefit."

But he wouldn't take my words. "It snowed this morning. The plum blossoms in our compound are blooming very beautifully. Let's take a walk to look at them." I looked at him and saw a shiny ray of hope in his eyes. I placed the book that was getting to the ooh ooh ah ah part down: "All right, I'll come with you for a walk."

Happy, he softly smiled.

We held hands and took a stroll around the plum forest. He didn't lie to me. The plums were blossoming quite beautifully today.

"Moxi, you know I love the view of these red plum blossoms and their fragrance in the glistening snow, but do you know why?"

He thought for a while. "It's probably because your temper is very similar to this plum." I paused amid walking and looked into his eyes as I shook my head, smiling wordlessly.

He didn't really get it, but he left me to my perusal of his face. Gradually, a hint of a smile appeared: "Sansheng, do you like looking at me?"

"Yes." I used my hand to measure the distance between his head and mine. He was now a full head taller than I was. I tilted my head in thought: "Moxi, let me hear you call me 'darling'."

His ears suddenly reddened.

"You're fast approaching your coming-of-age," I said. "I think this child bride should finally be promoted after so many years. Just choose a date and marry me, won't you?"

Ruddiness spread from his ears down to his cheeks, his Adam's apple slightly undulating. After a long while, a dash of chagrin emerged in his eyes. "Sansheng, you're, you're always..." He did not yet finish his sentence when I suddenly heard someone's voices from beyond the plum forest.

Ever since Moxi acquired a little fame, there was always someone coming to look for him. I'd never said a thing, but they interrupted our marriage conversation today. My face deflated. I was quite unhappy.

The voices of those who came were becoming louder and louder. Moxi had also faintly caught onto them. "Sansheng, it seems someone came to visit, let's go back to the house."

I hummed an answer and went back into my room, continuing to read my book.

Moxi went out to the guest hall to receive his guest.

Approaching noon, Moxi saw the guest out and then came into my room. He sat down without speaking. I reclined against my chair and also did not speak; my patience had always been great. He finally couldn't win against me.

"Sansheng."

"Hmm?"

"It was the governor who came by today."

"Oh."

"He... he told me to go the capital to become an official."

"Oh."

Perhaps my indifference was making Moxi a little lost. He carefully studied my face.

Seeming to have made up his determination, he said, "I want to go."

I quietly turned to the last page of my book. The love story had a happy ending. I then turned around to look at Moxi. He was intently watching me. I sighed, "A man should have ambitions. It's an official that you aspire to be, not a thief... albeit fundamentally, there's not much difference between the two. But I will admit that the Imperial Court is

one of the places to chase your ambitions. I've always hoped that you can be triumphant in life. Now that you are in possession of both talent and opportunity, you should be brave and go. Why are you looking at me?"

Moxi shook his head. "I'm not becoming an official for any ambition..." His cheeks flushed ruddy. "As you said, I'm almost twenty. I've, I've always thought to have a talk with you about our marriage one day."

I held the cup, frozen on the spot.

His smile was utterly helpless. "But Sansheng, you are always a step ahead of me."

He added, "I want to have a family with you, but as a man, I cannot let you take care of me for the rest of my life. I want to bring you happiness using my own ability."

"Sansheng, will you wait two years for me? After I succeed, I will come back to marry you."

I couldn't say 'no'.

At that moment, I wished I was an ordinary girl. I wished I was waiting for him to come home and call "Sansheng" to me from the door.

However, he wanted me to wait two years. I was originally a very patient rock, but I just couldn't bear it this time. After a night of tossing and turning, I suddenly sat up in bed.

"Moxi."

I knew he wasn't there, but I still wanted to call his name, as though he would appear in front of me if I'd only call out to him.

"Moxi."

I called to him thusly three times, but I received no other answer besides the rustling wind outside. I could not fall asleep again, so I simply rolled

out of bed, and without packing anything, I left the house in only a white robe straight to the capital to find my husband.

03: Sansheng is the only one for me

I was no stranger to the capital.

Having once been chased around the city by the old monk for more than three months, I'd gone to all the places I needed to go and been to all the places I needed to be; there wasn't a thing left for me to be curious about.

I was anxious to find Moxi, but since I didn't want him to know I was so attached to him, I didn't dare to look for him in the open. It hadn't been long since he was recommended to be an official. As it was still the beginning, he must be having a hard time with little fame to speak of. I took to the streets to ask around, but no one had any information to offer. There were times when I thought to go to the palace to find him, but the imperial family was surrounded by such resplendent royal air that it suffocated me, and so I could only give up the idea in the end.

After debating back and forth, I decided that during the day I would wait for luck to smile on me, and then at night, go to high-ranking officials' homes to search for Moxi's whereabouts.

I had thought at first that looking for Moxi in person would yield better odds than trying to wait around for luck, but my luck ended up surprising me with its remarkable felicity.

That day, the capital was filled with sunshine. I was idly walking down the streets as I tapped a stalk of scallion onto my romance novel. Suddenly, I heard a commotion ahead where groups of people were beginning to amass. In a moment of curiosity, I stuffed the book away, flung the scallion to the side, and walked over to catch the show.

This show turned out to be a rather interesting one. It was a very dramatic “the water flows on with no regards for the flower’s feelings” story that was unfolding.

The ‘indifferent water’ was precisely my husband Moxi, and the ‘falling flower’, if I wasn’t wrong, should be the general’s beloved daughter, Shi Qianqian.

How did I know? Well, largely because her boudoir ornaments weren’t too shabby.

I’d been selling a lot of jewelry these days, and hers fetched in the most money.

Shi Qianqian was lying dejectedly on the ground. Her ankle seemed to be hurt. She was looking at Moxi with a pair of peach eyes streaming in tears, but Moxi’s gaze just indifferently swept past her before he turned away. Then, Shi Qianqian rushed forward to catch his hem.

Unfortunately, Moxi avoided her quick as a flash, landing her on the ground and causing her face to be smeared in dirt.

The crowd of onlookers sighed pityingly at Shi Qianqian who lay sprawling on the ground in embarrassment, stubbornly biting her lips with reddened eyes. She looked so fragile that it made me feel sorry for her.

Yet Moxi was altogether unmoving. Without giving her one single glance out of the corner of his eyes, he quickly walked away.

Hmm, I rubbed my chin thinking. Moxi had never given me such a look since the day I fostered him since he was nine. I hadn’t thought he’d be such a cold-hearted man away from home.

The young lady was very stubborn. After Moxi left, the others tried to help her but she would not let them, instead choosing to stand up herself. Thinking that she who liked Moxi must certainly be a good-hearted girl who knew right from wrong, I conjured a small spell and treated her injured ankle. Paying little attention to the surprise on her face, I turned around and chased after my Moxi.

Moxi was entering a small tavern. I stopped under a weeping willow next to the building, unable to take another step for the tavern had become different today. It was exuding the same intense royal air as did the imperial palace. I stared up to the second floor where a man dressed in blue was leaning against the window and drinking by himself.

The emperor.

The emperor of this particular world was a fairly wise ruler. Peace and prosperity reigned the land in this good era. Unfortunately, his general wielded so much power that the young emperor was having sleepless nights, and was now thinking of ways to strip the general of his military control.

It hadn't been long since Moxi arrived in the capital yet he could already meet the emperor in private. It seemed he must've thought of an excellent way to help the monarch eliminate his major concern.

While I was appreciating how smart Moxi was, a man dressed in Daoist robes suddenly emerged from the alley next to the tavern.

The Imperial Reverend. This was the most powerful priest in the world, and I instantly recognized him. In the past, the old monk who hunted me down had also entreated this man to help him catch me.

I could already foresee another struggle seeing that I was running into him again.

As I was lamenting how shitty life was, he unexpectedly shot me a look, then turned around and left. While I was left in puzzlement, I suddenly heard a soft voice calling from the second floor of the tavern: "Sansheng!"

It was Moxi who saw me from the window.

Having nowhere to hide, I smiled at him in answer. "I've come because I miss you every second of the day and the nights are far too long without you. Let's haste our wedding along, Moxi."

As soon as I finished, the streets went dead silent for a long stretch of time. Moxi blushed at this long silence.

“Hahaha.” Behind him came the emperor’s hearty laughter. “What a bold beauty. Moxi, you have quite the luck!”

Moxi bowed to the emperor and made a rush downstairs. I beamed at him. Moxi walked over, looking as though he was doing everything he could to rein back his joy. He knitted his brow and asked, “Why have you come to find me so soon? I had thought I’d have to wait another six months. Since you came all alone, did you have a hard journey? Did you encounter any trouble on the way? Are you hungry? Do you want to rest?”

I just looked at him with a smile.

Moxi gave me a good look and said, “I’ve worried for nothing. Sansheng would never let herself suffer. How did you find me?”

“I saw you on the street just now.”

Moxi’s smiling face slightly stiffened. He hurried to explain: “Sansheng, that’s...”

“I know, the girl who likes you.”

He carefully observed my face. “Her looks aren’t bad,” I said, “but she’s a bit short, so she’s not the one for you.”

“But of course,” Moxi laughed at my words. “Sansheng’s the only one for me.”

I patted his shoulder in high spirits. “I’m glad you know.”

“I’ll go say goodbye to His Majesty, and then I’ll take you back to rest.”

“Alright.”

It turned out Moxi did not live in the palace, nor did he lodge at some minister's home. Instead, he bought a quiet cabin, the layout of which was very similar to the plum compound he and I had lived in.

After supper, I pulled Moxi out for a walk in the small garden.

"The capital is very different from the small town we used to live in. You must not have been accustomed to living here by yourself?"

"There's not really much I have to get used to. But there were mornings when I got up and didn't see the dishes you laid out for me, or the evenings when I came home and didn't see the candle light you left on for me. When I thought of you being all alone at home, I wasn't sure how you would be able to take care of yourself, and it had made me feel a little rueful."

I giggled as my heart burst in joy. I held his hand and gazed at the stars over our heads, swinging leisurely as we walked. "Moxi."

"Yes."

"Moxi."

"Yes?"

"Moxi."

"What is it?"

"I just want to call your name," I said. "Every time I call your name, I get to hear your reply. I suddenly feel that this sort of happiness isn't very easy to have."

Moxi lightly smiled. I continued: "It must be hard to come to the capital and be an official?"

Moxi was silent for a while before saying: "Being able to use my power to help people in need, being able to rely on my own hands to fulfill my compassion so that there'd be people who would become happy as a result of my actions. Even if palace intrigues are rather troublesome, if

these powers I achieve can be used for the people... Sansheng, do you understand this sort of satisfaction?"

I could not help but shiver as I looked up at him. There was an unmistakable gleam in his eyes I had never seen before.

At this moment, I saw once more the Heavenly God of War who had come to the underworld accompanied by the radiance of light.

This was the true Moxi. All of a sudden, I recalled the words Jia had said to me many moons ago: "Lord Moxi is the God of War from Heaven. Although nothing is impossible in this world, he only cares for the world's welfare. If his heart is occupied by the common people, will there be any space for love?"

I had thought little of these words at first, but when I saw the expression in Moxi's eyes today, I came to realize Jia was actually a rather perceptive prophet.

Moxi truly had a heart for the common people, no matter what form he took...

The next day, Moxi went to the palace; and as usual, I stayed home and read my books.

I hadn't yet turned to the second page when I suddenly heard light, steady footsteps from the courtyard. Soldiers? Ever since I gained spiritual cognizance, I had been a behaving spirit. All right, so I'd been held captive by a ghost, scolded by Yanwang, hunted by a monk, and attacked by a priest, but I had yet to be apprehended by the hooligan authorities.

Since this was to be my first experience, I was tingly with excitement.

I was looking forward to their rushing in and accosting me, wanting to see what sort of offensive they were organizing. But after waiting forever long, only a neat series of knocks came rapping at the door. I was quite disappointed. I had no choice but to answer the door as was required by proper etiquette.

The soldiers were probably in hiding somewhere, for only a handsome girl stood by the doorway. I looked at her for a long time before some recognition came over me. Why, wasn't this the girl Moxi had tossed away on the street just yesterday – Shi Qianqian?!

When she saw me open the door, she suddenly looked as if she was struck by lightning. "There really is a woman," she muttered to herself. "He had really brought a woman home."

Liking a man was one thing, making a ruckus in someone's home was another.

Thinking to myself I couldn't let this girl's feelings get ahead of themselves, I crossed my arms in front of my chest, leaned against the door and said, "That's right, I am his woman. I've shared a bed with him among other things since we were children. Is there something you would like to say?"

The young ignorant girl was shocked by my words. She stumbled two steps backward and almost fell to the ground. I raised an eyebrow at her, feeling slightly cruel, but at the same time, vindicated.

At this point, a middle-aged woman suddenly jumped out from the side, pointed at me, and began her condemnation: "Don't you dare harass our young lady! Don't let your obscenities soil her ears!"

I was utterly innocent. "I answered because she asked. Every word I said is true.

Why would any of it be obscene?"

Shi Qianqian's face went even whiter. The woman railed at me: "Brazen harlot!

How dare you be insolent to our young lady! Men, take her away!"

I rubbed my forehead in frustration. She was clearly the vexatious one. As I was about to reason with her, a group of blue-uniformed soldiers suddenly sprang out.

“Oh!” My eyes lit up as I gasped in excitement. The woman shouted, “She’s about to release her hidden projectiles! Protect the young lady!”

The sharp sounds of swords leaving their sheaths raised the hair on my arms.

I opened my mouth, but the phrase “let’s keep the peace” hadn’t sounded when a large blade had swung straight down my head. Through the tempering of the human world, my temper was now much more restrained compared to when I first came here. Nevertheless, I couldn’t let people bully me like this. My expression at once frosted up as I fiercely glared at the first soldiers to rush toward me.

Mortals who had never practiced sorcery would immediately become petrified by one icy stare of mine. They would plop to their knees in a desperate kowtow.

But the people in the back did not learn their lesson, still flying at me like a swarm.

I recited an incantation, gently waved my arm, and the soldiers who came to siege me all flew away. I sighed: “If we’re going to live as humans, then let’s learn to observe and assess the situation at hand, shall we?”

Shi Qianqian and the other woman were both swept off their feet by the forces of darkness and fell to the floor. They looked at me in stupefaction. I stepped forward and offered my hand to pull the woman up, but she screamed “monster” and scrambled away. I had no choice but to turn and help Shi Qianqian.

By contrast, she docilely let me help her up. I wiped the dust from her face for her and said, “No matter how much you like someone, you should still have some self respect. Don’t come to others’ homes and make a ruckus anymore. Not only will it belittle your status, it is also of little use. Oh, Moxi’s three lifetimes have also been destined for me. If you really want to seduce him, then come back in another three lifetimes.”

Everything I said was the truth; I didn't think her ears would actually process it to be something different. Her eyes were red as she turned and ran in tears.

I gave the house a good sweep, then tranquilly returned to my book again. I remembered I had left off at the couple's first meeting where the girl gave the hero a kiss. In my opinion, the scene could bear to be a bit more tasteful.

04: Moxi, may peace follow you in life

Moxi hastened home in the evening.

I was leaning against the divan as I gave him a glance and continued to read my book. He stood in the doorway for a moment before cautiously coming in. He sat down on the edge of the divan, deliberated, and then said, "I heard soldiers came today."

"Yes."

"Sansheng..."

I threw the book to the side, sat up, and looked him square in the eyes. "What do you want to ask me?"

He opened his mouth but did not manage any word.

"It was I who beat those soldiers off," I told him. "Shi Qianqian was also chased away by me."

He looked at me for a moment, and then actually smiled a rather helpless smile.

I raised an eyebrow and said, "What? So you want to marry the general's daughter? Oh, I was wrong then; I've ruined your marriage. If it makes you this sad, I'll go look and bring her back. She seems smitten with you." I walked out the moment I finished speaking.

He pulled me back, his face slightly blushing. “Sansheng, you know that wasn’t what I meant. I’m actually very happy that you... that you would be so jealous because of me. It’s just that...”

“It’s just what?”

“The soldiers said that you’re a demon. They intend to invite the Imperial Reverend here to exorcise evil tomorrow.”

“The Imperial Reverend?” I recalled seeing that stern face yesterday in the alley.

Moxi frowningly nodded. “Sansheng, do you need to hide?”

“Hide?” I asked quizzically. “Why should I hide? I’m not a demon.” But seeing Moxi’s worried expression, I suddenly understood. “Moxi, have you always thought of me as a demon? Do you want me to hide because you’re afraid that the Imperial Reverend would uncover my ‘demonic’ identity?”

Moxi frowned.

I nodded my head and muttered to myself: “I guess it’s to be expected. I’ve lived with you for so many years yet my appearance hasn’t changed a whit. When I wanted fire, I would make fire; when I wanted wind, I would make wind. It makes sense that you would think of me as a demon. Right now, you must be afraid of me?”

After listening to my words, a sudden change came over Moxi’s face: a rare trace of anger. “Why should I be afraid of you?! So what if you’re a demon? I only know that my Sansheng has never harmed me. I’m not a heartless person. I know exactly how each person in this world treats me! Not to mention, you’re not an evil demon at all, and even if you are, I’ve already loved you and will love you for the rest of my life!”

The word ‘love’ made me happy inside. My mouth could not help curling into a smile.

Moxi had always been mild-tempered. Needless to say, he was especially gentle toward me. I rarely saw him so riled up that I found his present display rather strange. “Then what are you afraid of?”

His face stiffened. My laying bare his thoughts had slightly discomfited him. He was silent for a moment, and then he sighed. “Sansheng, I’m afraid you’ll be harassed.”

I was amused after I heard him. “Do you remember Fatty Wang’s backyard?”

He glanced at me: “Not even a blade of grass was left.”

I nodded in satisfaction. “It’s fine to be bullied as long as I can bully them back. Your wife can swallow anything except for abuse. You have nothing to worry about.”

Cheered up by my quip, Moxi did not say anything more.

In the evening when we went to wash up, I saw a small hole in his sleeve. I asked in surprise, “What happened?”

Moxi hid his sleeve away. “It’s nothing. I just had a quarrel with some soldiers today and my shirt got caught on their armor, that’s all.”

I reached my hand out: “Give the robe to me. I’ll help you patch it up.”

Under the candlelight, I patched the hole stitch by stitch. Moxi sat next to me, tilting his head to watch me help him mend his clothes. A smile lingered on his lips as though he found bliss in this little thing.

“All done.” I handed him the robe. Seeing the contentment on his face, I out of nowhere asked him, “Is the current emperor a good ruler?”

Moxi received his robe and replied, “He is a very wise sovereign.”

I nodded. “Then that great general who holds all the military power in his hands – is he also a good general?”

Moxi frowned. "If we speak of commanding troops in combat, he is undoubtedly talented. However, we do not need his kind of blood-thirst to keep the country in peace."

I nodded again. "If he is rid of, will the people's livelihood be better?"

"Without the general's control, the emperor will be able to freely pass down reforms, and the people's livelihood will naturally improve."

Moxi looked at me strangely. "Sansheng, when have you become interested in these things?"

"If there's a way to get rid of the general for the sake of the people, will you be happy?"

Moxi's eyes lit up, but he instantly lowered his gaze to hide that glimmer in his eyes.

"Of course I would be happy."

I nodded again. "It's getting late. You have things to do tomorrow, go to bed."

After the candle went out in Moxi's room, I remained sitting in bed, eyes wide open looking out to the moonlight beyond the windowpanes.

Why would Moxi quarrel with other people for no reason? I strung along everything that had happened today and came to understand. He must've heard someone calling me a demon, and when he next heard the Imperial Reverend would be coming here tomorrow to 'exorcise' me, he momentarily could not hold back his temper and engaged in a confrontation with the others.

Moxi had always been a tolerant person, and he hadn't been an official for long. Despite favoring him, the emperor didn't even bestow on him an estate.

Apparently, Moxi was in a very difficult position at court.

By sparring with the people from the general's household today, I had pushed Moxi into the storm.

It was true I wasn't anything like other people. Tomorrow when the Imperial Reverend arrived, if he were to say things such as "darkness lurks in thee" or "thou art not a life-form of this world", then Moxi could just kiss his ideals and struggles goodbye...

No matter what I chose to do, I must not implicate him.

I thought of the gleam in Moxi's eyes when he spoke of his ideals. I used an invisible spell and went into Moxi's room. "It was you who gave me my three lives," I said as I watched his sleeping face, "so it hardly matters if I must use my life to help you intercept your tribulation. And since I am your wife in this existence, I'll have to offer my full support for whatever it is my husband wants."

I sat by his bedside, leaned over, and softly placed a kiss on his lips. "Moxi, may peace follow you in life."

Early next morning, a decree urgently summoned Moxi into the palace. He repeatedly reminded me before leaving that if the Imperial Reverend were to come, I must stick it out until he came back. I readily promised him.

Shortly after he left, a priest glowing with sublime aura came to the house. This Imperial Reverend looked very young from all outer appearances.

"You are bold to actually dare come to the capital after killing Abbot Kongchen."

The first thing the Imperial Reverend said to me was this. I dazed out for a good long while before I remembered the Abbot Kongchen he spoke of was the monk who had tried to hunt me down throughout those nine years. "That's not true. He died of old age; it didn't have anything to do with me. I'm not a demon, and I can't kill people."

The Imperial Reverend scoffed. “Darkness lurks in thee. If you’re not a demon, then tell me, what are you?”

If I said I was the spirit of a stone on the Wangchuan bank, I was pretty sure he would insist I was a ghost. I pondered for a moment and asked, “Why are you so sure I am a demon?”

“We’ll know whether you are or not once I use my Samādhi Fire to verify the truth.”

I thought for a while and then nodded in agreement. “Alright, but you must do it in a crowded place and burn me on a scaffold. Let the people see it. If I am burned in the end, it proves that I am not a demon, and you must use your honor as the Imperial Reverend to proclaim to the world that you have killed the wrong person.”

He was flabbergasted by my words. At length, he said, “There better not be some tricks up your sleeve!”

“Hey, you’re a man of religion, how can you have such impure thoughts? All right, all right, I’m in a hurry. Please quickly drag me away to burn.”

I briskly walked out the door. On the other hand, he remained rooted inside the house. I frowned questioningly, went back, and pulled his arm: “Why are you being such a woman? You weren’t this hesitant when you last tried to help the old monk kill me.”

When we reached the market’s entrance, soldiers were already there to set up the scaffold. These few soldiers looked very familiar to me; I presumed they were also people from the general’s household. They became briefly stupefied when they saw that I wasn’t harmed in the least, but that I was even dragging the Imperial Reverend here. I turned around and leapt onto the scaffold, with elegance and grace, of course, sending the onlookers aflutter with wonderment.

I tied a rope haphazardly around me, waved to the reverend beneath and called out, “Hey, it’s done!”

The Imperial Reverend made no movement besides looking at me with a scowl. I also just watched him back.

Suddenly, a woman came out from the side. It was the same woman who had accompanied Shi Qianqian the other day to stir trouble in our home.

She yelled once she saw me: "It's her! She's a demon! She has bewitched the Chancellor and even hurt our young lady. It was so terrible that our young lady has yet to wake. Your Eminence, you must help us eliminate this monster. We must stamp out the seed of evil!" She pulled on the Imperial Reverend's sleeve while she cried, weeping so much that the audience had to shed tears along with her. If the person she was pointing at and castigating weren't me, I fear I would also share the same hatred with her.

The Imperial Reverend's eyes frosted up as he brushed her off of him and coldly asked me, "Do you have anything to say in your defense?"

"I'm really not a demon," I sighed.

An egg came hurling at my dress. A little kid in expensive-looking clothes made his way out of the crowd as he threw another egg at me. "You bullied my sister! You're a bad person! You even stole my sister's love from her! Brother Moxi clearly likes my sister. It's all because of you!"

My brow unconsciously furrowed while looking at the two smashed eggs on my dress. But what had provoked me more was the words he said. I smirked and wiggled a finger, lifting the little brat into the air. "Kiddo, your sister likes him, but the one he likes is me."

He thrashed about in the air. The middle-aged woman's wailing was now trumpeting even more loudly as she kept on yelling: "Vixen, don't you dare harm our young master!" The surrounding crowd was also starting to buzz.

“Don’t harm others!” The Imperial Reverend icily shouted. The rope bounding me tightened, strength left my finger, and the little brat was released from the air, caught by the woman.

Forthwith, a burning sensation climbed over me as a fire ignited at the soles of my feet.

The Samādhi Fire.

This mortal had really practiced the Samādhi Fire. A difficult feat, that.

In truth, I was afraid of fire. There were few spiritual beings in the underworld who weren’t afraid of fire. If one needed to differentiate a demon from a spiritual being, using fire would indeed be a good method. A demon would leave behind an orb after incineration, but spirits and humans would leave nothing behind.

I was not afraid of death, because from every point of view, I had never lived. My hometown was at the River of Oblivion in the netherworld. I was, in fact, born in the land of death itself.

The scorching fire stung me painfully. In my trance, I saw my old acquaintances.

They floated in the air as they watched me being licked by the flames. I wanted to say hello to them, but I was in so much pain I could scarcely do a thing.

I didn’t know how much time had passed. As the burning sensation on my body gradually receded, the Black and White Guards of Impermanence waved their hands and called me to their sides. I hadn’t felt this light and airy in a very long time. “Haha!” Black Impermanence guffawed as he patted me on the shoulder. “I’ve seen so many types of death, but the way you looked bathed in fire gave us several rounds of shock.”

His face was filled with such delight that I didn’t know what to say. I just placed my palms together to greet them and said a few courteous words then turned around and looked to the ground. The crowd and the

woman were ecstatically cheering the Imperial Reverend's name. As for the reverend, he was now ascending the tall scaffold alone, his eyes searching in the pile of ashes while his face gradually paled.

"Let's go, come with your big brothers and tell us how your life has been."

"Hold on, wait here for me just a second. I... I have something unfinished I need to do."

They glanced at each other. White Impermanence asked, "The God of War?"

I nodded.

"Come back quickly."

The imperial family's royal aura was still as overwhelming as ever. Luckily, I had now become a spiritual entity, and it was much easier for me to enter the palace.

When I detected Moxi, he was standing opposite the emperor's desk.

"I hope Your Majesty can protect my wife and see to her safety," he was saying with a bow.

The emperor took a sip of tea before answering him: "A woman will always be just that."

"Your Majesty, Sansheng is my heart and soul, and life itself."

Warmth filled my heart. I landed near him and hugged him from behind.

"Moxi, I was fortunate to have met you."

Moxi slightly tensed. He sharply turned around, his gaze passing through me and landing on a place I knew not where.

As if he had sensed something, Moxi suddenly rushed outside.

"Insolence!" The eunuch by the emperor's side shouted. His Majesty

waved his hand to stop the eunuch as Moxi left the hall running along the palace road.

I followed him the entire way.

He first returned home. When he saw the house empty with no one in sight, his face blanched white like a sheet of parchment. He stood frozen for a moment, then ran out again. After stopping and asking everyone on the street, he finally staggered to the marketplace.

At this time, the Imperial Reverend was standing atop the high scaffold, holding a handful of ashes as he solemnly stated, "Upon my honor as the Imperial Reverend, I declare that the woman named Sansheng was not, in fact, a demon."

The clamor by my ears all seemed to have faded away. All I saw was the emptiness in Moxi's eyes as he reeled two steps backward.

I lurched forward to hold him, but my hands passed right through his body.

I sighed.

"Sansheng..." he whispered my name with a grief beyond words.

"Yes," I answered, but I suddenly remembered he could neither hear my voice nor see me anymore.

"Sansheng."

"I'm here."

But I was not; I was no longer in his eyes.

Just as Sansheng was no longer in Moxi's life.

05: He's protecting you, my dear

My nape slightly burned the moment I stepped into the underworld. Of the three seals Yanwang gave me, one had disappeared. This meant that one of the three lifetimes Moxi promised me had also come to an end.

After returning to the underworld, I did not like walking alone along the Wangchuan anymore. What was the point, when I would be by myself anyway?

Each day, I leaned against the stone while waiting for Moxi to come once more through the door of reincarnation so that I could leave with him to earth.

Time tended to fly in the underworld. It only occurred to me that four decades had passed by on earth when I by chance met someone whom I considered somewhat of an acquaintance again.

I grinned at him. He, too, recognized me and was stunned for some time. It took him quite a while to recollect himself. "You?"

"Reverend, it's been a while. You haven't aged at all."

He took little notice of my teasing and frowned. "Why haven't you reincarnated?"

"I'm waiting for someone."

I said what I said very casually, but it took him by surprise. He sighed after a period of silence: "It was I who caused you two to be worlds apart..."

I waved my hands and was about to say that it had all been the work of fate when he went on: "You've spent your whole life waiting in hell for him while he's spent his entire life mourning for you on earth. I was wrong to have robbed the two of you of your happiness." He paused, as if he was thinking of something, and then firmly declared: "What goes around comes around. Since I owe the two of you in this lifetime, I shall without fail repay you in the next."

“There’s no need, really,” I swiftly told him. “This is between Moxi and me, and we wouldn’t want to drag outsiders into it.”

He flapped his sleeves, shook his head sighingly, and went on his way.

I believed it was unavoidable for those who lived too long to have the bad habit of using their own viewpoint to try and speculate or determine someone else’s mind.

No matter how accomplished he was as a priest in this life, one bowl of Old Meng’s soup, one step across the Naihe Bridge, and one jump down the reincarnation well would completely wipe his past existence clean.

The next life would never make up for the last’s mistakes.

After the Imperial Reverend reincarnated, I wondered if perhaps Moxi was also coming to the underworld. Each day, I gazed into the Wangchuan and groomed myself until I was so clean that I almost seemed out of place in the dreary underworld. In my free time, I sat by the stone to learn the humans’ ways. I picked up a stick and traced some circles on the ground, whispering: “Moxi, come down quickly, come down quickly.”

My sincerity must have finally moved the heavens. That day as I finished dressing myself and struck a pose on the stone, I saw Moxi stomping on the cluster amaryllises along the Yellow Springs as he made his way to me, looking rather furious.

Oh, he was furious all right.

I was still fairly confused by the time a ball of searing flame hit my feet. Startled, I quickly hopped away to dodge it.

The surrounding imps and spirits that had been watching immediately scuttled away at the sight of fire.

Not knowing what was going on, I looked over to Moxi. He was looking just as he did the first time I saw him – his presence ever heavenly.

But this heavenly creature was fuming for no reason, and it was giving me quite a befuddlement.

I felt a little aggrieved. I'd waited so long for him to come. We'd only met and hadn't even said a thing before he already started to attack me. I was really hurt by this!

He neared and reached for my wrist. I protected my vital portal and ducked to the side, barely avoiding his clutch.

He scoffed: "So you've learned how to dodge and be afraid now. Why aren't you letting me catch you? Why aren't you letting me burn you? Have you realized that your life doesn't come so easily and now you cannot bear to lose it?"

I pondered over the meaning behind his words. "Moxi, are you mad at me?"

"Mad?" He scoffed. "Why would I be? You protected me, sacrificed your life to shield me, and intercepted my tribulation for me. I can never thank you enough, how would I dare to be mad at you?"

I opened my mouth to say I didn't know why he was so angry, and then to poke at his facade that his words and deeds did not line up. But seeing the fury scowling between his eyebrows, I shut up and swallowed it down, the feeling of grievance rising higher.

Seeing my aggrieved look and misty eyes, his face hardened as he rigidly said,

"You're not allowed to cry."

I kept looking at him with those same watery eyes.

The veins on his forehead twitched. In the end, he let out a heavy sigh. "Never mind." His eyes softened, and then he patted my head and gave me a helpless smile. "I was really the one at fault." Almost instantly, his expression darkened again. "Why has the scent of darkness in you gotten so much stronger?"

I hid my face sheepishly. “Since I thought you would soon be here, I’d been using the water in the stream to wash myself every day. Do you like the way I look?”

Moxi fell silent for a long while.

“I tidy things up every day,” I said, “while waiting for you to come down here. Moxi, when will you reincarnate so I can go with you?”

He frowned. “Go with me?”

“Of course.”

He flipped his wrist as a golden seal struck me. “You are not allowed to leave the underworld for fifty years.”

Dismayed, I asked, “Why?! Didn’t you say you would promise me three lifetimes in world?”

“Yes. All I’m asking is that you come in another fifty years.”

“But you also promised to let me seduce you.”

“You can come seduce me in fifty years.”

“But you’ll be a dying old man by then. By the time I find you, we won’t have much time left to spend together!”

“Don’t come to look for me, then.”

When he finished his words, he strode to the Naihe Bridge. I was so angry that I grabbed a handful of mud and slung it straight at the back of his head.

He stood with his back against me, hence I didn’t know what kind of expression was on his face. I only saw Old Meng suddenly kneeling down and kowtowing deeply as she pleaded: “Have mercy, M’lord.”

Only then did I remember that the soil in the underworld had been trampled on by innumerable ghosts and spirits. It was the filthiest thing

in the three realms. My slinging mud at his head, for a god from Heaven, was a grave insult.

He glanced sideways, his voice a little stoic: "I don't want you to become my tribulation again."

What a strange thing to say. For a moment, I did not understand. I only watched him drink Old Meng's soup without once looking back. Then he entered reincarnation and was gone.

He must've thought I was too meddlesome and thus did not want me to go with him. This thought made me so sad that I rammed headlong into the stone crying my eyes out.

If it were someone else who had bullied me, I would've returned the favor tenfold.

But it was Moxi who had bullied me... it was Moxi so I could only let myself be bullied. I not only couldn't win against him, I couldn't even let him go.

I didn't know how long I had cried by the time someone called out to me from outside the stone: "Miss Sansheng. Oh no, my dear Madam Sansheng, don't cry, anymore."

I poked my head out from the stone and looked at my visitor with swollen eyes.

"Jia, what is it?"

Jia rubbed his temple, then shook his head and said, "For the past few days, the tears pouring from your stone has made the water in the Wangchuan rise a few meters higher. It's astonishing for a stone to be weeping this much. The souls crossing the Naihe Bridge have all been scared away. Yanwang especially bid me to come by your place so we can help you think things through."

I nodded, then followed Jia to Yanwang's palace in utter anguish.

Despite looking lean, the incumbent Yanwang was quite a glutton. When I saw him, he was in fact gnawing happily on a trotter.

I nodded a hello to him: “Yanwang.”

“Oh, Sansheng’s here.” He waved his hand. At once, the imp by his side brought a ham hock over to me. It was so greasy that I felt nauseated. I waved my hand and let the imp step down.

Yanwang took a look at me and said, “I heard that you’ve been nursing a heartbreak over Lord Moxi these past few days.”

Upon hearing Moxi’s name, my nose stung and my eyes began to well up again.

“No, no, don’t!” he sputtered in an effort to stop me. “Today I’ve called for you so that we can solve this knot of yours. If you keep on crying, I’m afraid the Wangchuan is going to flood.”

“Sansheng,” he was saying as he wiped his mouth, “do you know which three tribulations Lord Moxi is to undergo in the lower realm?”

I shook my head.

“To part though he is in love, to meet though there is enmity, and to seek what he cannot have. These are three of the eight tribulations in Buddhism. In his last lifetime, he had had to separate from his love. In Siming Xingjun’s Book of Fate, it is written that Lord Moxi and the general’s daughter, Shi Qianqian, were to have affections for each other but would come to live their entire lives apart due to their being on opposition sides. Such was to be the pain of parting with the person he met you, he eventually developed feelings after all the years you spent together. You wanted to help him avoid his fate, so you died to pave a smoother path for him. Well, spending a lifetime separated from you was also ‘parting with the person he loved’. You have more or less fulfilled his trial, albeit unwittingly so.”

Yanwang paused and then sighed. “You haven’t seen the way Lord Moxi had looked in the human world. Tsk tsk, he was originally such an

amiable person, but for you, he had ruthlessly forced the emperor to persecute the general's entire clan. He must've loved you very deeply, for he never married in his entire life. Then after returning to the underworld, he began to recall things from the past. One might think that as a celestial deity, he would be an abstemious person who does not cling to the past. And yet he is still behaving this way in front of you. Well... it's obvious the feelings he had for you haven't stopped. His Lordship is confining you in the underworld for fifty years simply because he wants to stagger his and your time on earth. He doesn't want you to become his tribulation again."

"He's protecting you, my dear," he was now saying to me.

I froze at his words.

"Those in Heaven look down on those of us in the underworld. Sansheng, do your best to seduce Lord Moxi. Only then would our underworld... Ahahaha, you know what I mean, don't you?"

Yanwang's hysteric laughter faded far, far away. Only one sentence drifted back and forth in my head. "He's protecting you, my dear."

The 2nd Lifetime – We Meet Though in Enmity

06: The Venerable Zhonghua

I never knew there could be fifty years so torturous.

After I waited out my sentence, I bid Yanwang goodbye and entered reincarnation.

If I didn't go to look for Moxi in this life, what if he gave me another fifty-year seal the next time he returned to the underworld? For this reason, I did just as he asked.

I only went to seduce him when he was already feeble and old. I heard that men were most easily corrupted at this age. They had their careers, they had their families, they had already enjoyed everything that needed to be enjoyed, but life at this point was lacking a little excitement for them.

If I were to go give him some excitement now, this whole seduction thing would be as easy as pie.

It had seemed so simple in my mind, but life is always full of surprises.

The time I spent waiting in the underworld totaled about a hundred years. The darkness in me wasn't any lighter compared to the first time I went to the human world. I'd also just left, which meant the mustiness of darkness was still fresh on me. It didn't take long before I attracted a group of little priests like a piece of rotting meat attracting flies.

This era was a little too enthusiastic about slaying demons and sorcery had advanced so much. The group of little priests would still be a few years younger than I was even if their ages were combined and multiplied by ten. And yet they were so composed that they seemed to carry in them profound cultivation...

I wasn't good at dealing with such serious children, so I used Yanwang's tone to threaten them: "Scram, or I'll throw you in a stew and eat you!"

“Arrogant, blustering fool!” The leading child raised his sword at me. “I shall exterminate you today!” he howled.

I raised my brow watching this kid, so savage for a young’un. It was apparent from his behavior that he had not been taught properly. I shook my head and blamed his teacher. As I was trying to figure out a way to escape, a woman’s shout suddenly came from the distance: “Changwu, get back this instant.” She was dressed in white, her ribbons fluttering as she flew to us like a fairy descending from the sky.

I watched her in wonderment. I would’ve never expected there to be such an ethereal person in this earthly world. But I had yet to finish admiring her when her hand all of a sudden released a white ribbon that shot out with the wind and tightly bound me.

After struggling awhile, I discovered that this thing was made from a very strange material.

The children prostrated to the woman, calling her ‘grandmaster’.

Grandmaster...

She gently nodded, told them to rise, and then stepped forward and studied me for some time. “So it’s a beautiful demon.”

I laughed. “You are also a beautiful nun.”

She coldly smirked. “Though I cannot see your origins, once you are bound by my silk tie, you won’t be able to escape no matter how skilled you are.”

I secretly wrestled with her freaky silk tie and began to feel that I actually wasn’t skilled at all. This thing was indeed a very effective rope. But if I were to be reckless, it wouldn’t be enough to keep me bound. The young lady had been too ignorant for her own good.

“Bring her back to Mount Liubo so that His Most Reverend Eminence can deal with her.” Like this, she bid the children. “Although I’ve tied

the demon up, I cannot fathom her powers. You'll need to stay vigilant. Don't let her find a way to escape.

I have an urgent matter to attend to, so I won't be coming back with you."

The children respectfully accepted her bidding in unison.

I'd only recently come to this world. Even if I wanted to find Moxi, I'd have no idea where to begin. It was therefore better to go with them. Not only would there be less harassment from other religious folks, I could also take this opportunity to catch Moxi's news.

The pint-sized adults solemnly 'escorted' me away. Watching them made me miss the old Moxi so much. Among these children, there was only one who still had some semblance of humanity left. His Daoist name was Chang'an – a mild-mannered child who was shy and reticent.

He reminded me of little Moxi in the last lifetime.

I loved watching him, but every time I peered at him, he always blanched in fright.

Confused, I listened around and learned that this kid was afraid I would one day break the shackles and abduct him to pluck his yang in order to nourish my yin[5].

I suddenly felt mortified. Not only was I a spiritual being who did not need to do such embarrassing things, what yang could such a child have for me to even pluck?

If I were to pluck someone's... I must first pluck Moxi's.

Thereafter, I had to restrain myself from using those hungry eyes to look at him.

On the way, I overheard from the little priests that the reigning emperor was quite religious. Folk Daoism was flourishing among the commoners and many dignitaries were sending their children to monasteries.

Additionally, Mount Liubo where they was much more prestigious than other ordinary temples.

What they strove for was divinity.

When the children said this, their faces were filled with pride, as if being a Liubo disciple was a blessing they had had to garner for hundreds of years. On the other hand, I coolly thought that although there had been mortals ascending to the sky, only one or two had succeeded every few thousand years. The rate of success was pitifully low.

These little munchkins walked very fast. We reached Mount Liubo in only a few days.

I didn't hear any news on Moxi along the way and got quite disappointed. As I was trying find a way to tear the silk tie before they entered the mountain, I saw the golden seal on my wrist reacting again.

I made a cry at the burning sensation only to feel a powerful energy sweeping above our heads and ruffling my hair messily.

After I brushed aside the flying hair from my face, I saw the group of little priests kneeling down toward one direction and shouting in unison: "Your Eminence!"

Ooh, so this was Liubo's boss.

I took a closer look and instantly jumped for joy. This was what they called 'wearing out your shoes' something or other but 'it came without any effort' something or other[6].

Why, wasn't this Moxi?!

At this time, however, he was looking at most to be in his twenties or thirties. He wasn't old or decrepit in the slightest, and didn't appear at all like someone who had lived in the human world for fifty years. But then it occurred to me that he was seeking divinity in this life, and he was therefore practicing magic of the immortals.

Even if he couldn't yet become a fairy, he could easily retain his youth.

I died laughing inside. Moxi, Moxi, you tried to hide from me but the heavens were cleverer than you. Let's see how you'd be hiding from me this time.

While I was busy grinning, three swords made a "whoosh" in my direction, their murderous intent giving me chills. I stopped grinning and looked to Moxi in bewilderment.

The three blades weren't his, but of the three white-browed, long-bearded priests behind him. They scowled, staring at me quite seriously.

Moxi coldly spoke: "What is this thing that it reeks of darkness?"

I stared at him dumbly. The look in his eyes... the look in his eyes... these were the same eyes he had used to look at Shi Qianqian in the last lifetime.

I didn't know why but I suddenly felt fearful. I had never liked to explain myself, but I was explaining myself now: "Though darkness is thick in me, I'm really not a demon. I am the spirit of a stone. My name is Sansheng."

The three white-bearded priests looked at each other in apparent perplexity, then turned to look at Moxi.

"If you are not our kind, then you are different. You must be rid of." Moxi coldly announced.

His words were so decisive that I was made both sad and angry. I didn't understand why Moxi had reincarnated into such a blockhead this time. Before I had time to say anything, flashes of swords had started to surge ahead, the white ribbon binding me also tightening.

My heart swelled with anger. Throughout the one thousand years I'd lived, except for those few times I abused myself to vent, no one had yet dared do this to me. I instantly transported my spiritual forces so I could contest with him.

If he were still the God of War, then my only option would be to await my death.

But he was at present just a human seeking divinity. He hadn't more than forty years of magic in him. Even if his practice was more profound, he couldn't win going heads-on with me no matter how gifted he was.

We hadn't confronted for half an hour but Moxi's face was already growing pale. I wondered if I should take advantage of my one thousand years in age to bully a deity who was undergoing his trial. I was going to stop when Moxi suddenly coughed out a mouthful of black blood.

Shocked, I quickly withdrew my spiritual forces.

Was my power so strong that I couldn't control it?

I was stunned.

The three white-bearded priests exclaimed: "Venerable Zhonghua!" and rushed to support Moxi and check his pulse. The Liubo students also clamored around him.

I wasn't worried that he would die (even if he did, I still wouldn't worry that much).

The way things were going, his 'meet though in enmity' fate was not yet over. If he hadn't gone through his trial, he wouldn't be able to reenter reincarnation.

The children worriedly surrounded him for a time before one of them suddenly stood up. I recognized him as the vicious kid named Changwu. Sure enough, he pulled his sword from its scabbard and pointed at me, saying hatefully: "Demoness, you even struck His Most Reverend while he was severely injured! You deserve to die!"

The moment he roared, the masses at once erupted in fury. The little priests pulled out their swords and angrily pointed them at me. Even the

most timid of them, Chang'an, was red with anger. They simultaneously growled that they must kill me to purge evil and protect the sacred.

I hated having kids surrounding me whining for candies, and although this situation was very different from whining for candies, it was really all the same to me.

I immediately surrendered: "All right, all right! Do what you will, do what you will!"

The group of children looked left and right, none dared to make a decision. Finally, an old priest took the chance and shouted: "Lock her up in the Pagoda of a Thousand Locks under the Enchanted Lake!"

There was a deep lake on Mount Liubo that wasn't very large but was terribly deep.

It was engulfed in supernatural forces, and thus the Liubo students called it the Enchanted Lake. The priests here had spent several hundred years to build the Pagoda of a Thousand Locks under the bottom of the lake that was specially used to trap dangerous demons.

I stood on the lakeside looking down to the pagoda that loomed underneath the rippling water. I rubbed my chin in thought. This thing was certainly a good place to imprison demons. Firstly, it was overflowing with spiritual forces, so it could suppress and purify a demon's miasma. Secondly, it was underwater! If he couldn't breathe, then no matter how powerful a demon was, he'd only wash up as a floating corpse after getting trapped for a century or two.

Nevertheless, it was different for me and other spiritual beings. The pure essence from Heaven and Earth was exactly conducive to my body and mind; it was the perfect place to facilitate my spiritual cultivation. I didn't bother struggling and let the children put heavy stone anklets on me before using a water suspending spell to take me to the lake's bottom.

The lake scenery wasn't too bad, I thought to myself.

After I was thrown into the Thousand-Lock Pagoda, the children began shouting to me from across the iron gate. There were talismans inside, they told me. Or if I forcibly tried to break out, I'd die an ugly death. Not giving a fart, I tore a piece of talisman off of the pillar and played with it.

This was a prison for demons; everything about it was structured to deal with demons. I'd already said a thousand times I wasn't a demon. Stupid, prejudiced humans!

Even Moxi was the same...

When I thought of this, I felt so wronged that my nose stung for a while before I was able to calm myself down.

I circled the bottom of the pagoda and found an entrance staircase. There, a night pearl shone all the way to the top. There seemed to be something up that way – too far away under the too-dim glow that I couldn't see very clearly. I became curious. Thinking there was nothing to do anyway, I slowly made my way up the stairs.

By the time I got a better look at the thing on top of the pagoda... hah, I have to say that I suddenly wanted to laugh when I saw who was being kept inside that thing.

Siming Xianjun (the God of Fate) really loved her soapy angst, didn't she? Wasn't this the Imperial Reverend from the last lifetime?!

Although his eyes were now green – emitting a faint coldness, although his hair was now white – giving off bizarre vibes, no matter how I looked at him, he still struck me as a dangerous monster. His hands and feet were chained in iron, his body stretched and hung in the air. A solid metal cage covered in talismans enclosed around him. This was one heck of a secure imprisonment.

He must've been downright scary at the time he was arrested.

A demon hunter in his past life, now a demon. This was what I'd call a karmic arrangement.

“Hey! Long time no see!” I waved at him to say hello.

“Who are you?” He stiffly spat each word out in a raspy voice. It seemed he had been locked in here for a long time.

I smiled. “I’m Sansheng.”

He knitted his brow. “Did we know each other?”

I rubbed my forehead in thought. “Well, not quite.”

No one said anything afterwards. I was dying a death of silence. I looked up to the top of the Thousand-Lock Pagoda where it was much brighter than below, the reason being that there was a hole in the ceiling.

I found it strange that here he was, chained up so securely, yet there was a wide open hole in front of him. Weren’t they afraid he’d find a chance to run away? Or were the Liubo priests so confident in the Thousand-Lock Pagoda’s ability to imprison all demons that they gave him a window so he would yearn for the outside world and die of despair?

I’ll be damned. These priests were beyond ruthless!

I hadn’t finished fantasizing when I heard him quietly say: “Back away.”

For the time being, I didn’t know what he meant, but I obediently listened to him and retreated into the dark.

Soon, I saw the lake changing into a beautiful shimmer. Then, a beam of sunlight shot through the hole in the ceiling and hit him square in the face, his terrifying ghastliness now outlined by the strong, bright light.

A trace of pain slowly emerged in his dull, green eyes.

I watched in horror as his skin slowly swelled up. While the sunlight became more intense, the swellings on his skin also began to blister, some even breaking open and oozing pus.

His expression only betrayed pain at the start, however. Now, he was even more still.

I'd seen so many punishments but this scene still made my stomach churn. Unable to stand it any longer, I took off my outer robe and threw it over the hole in the ceiling. Blocked by the fabric, the sunlight considerably weakened.

It took more than half an hour before the sun slowly moved away from the pagoda.

It suddenly occurred to me that it was high noon just now. Did that mean this man was burned day after day in the sun?

"Mind your own business." He offered what he thought of my action.

I graciously did not argue with him. "How long have you been kept here?"

He said nothing for a second, and then coldly laughed. "Maybe ten years, maybe twenty. Who knows?"

I sighed, feeling very sorry for him. Nonetheless, I was also awfully curious about his fate in this lifetime. "Why were you sent here? Who locked you in this place?"

He fell silent and did not talk to me again. Thinking that every creature inevitably had some broken things in his heart he did not want to share, I did not press him any further, instead changing the subject and asked, "Do you want to get out of here?"

"What does it matter what I want? It'll just be a delusion."

I smugly smiled. "What if I have a way to get you out?"

He looked up at me; a glimmer abruptly sparked in his dull, green eyes.

"Well, you don't seem like a bad person to me. At least you were nice enough to tell me to avoid the sunlight. I don't know why you are trapped here, but you've been here for so long that I reckon whatever punishment it was, it should be enough by now. Since you and I could be considered to be acquaintances, I'll be nice and save you this once,

but I won't do it for free. Since you owe me today, you'll have to return the favor in the future."

"And what do you want in return?"

"Recently there are some brats that really get on my nerves, but since I'm a nice girl, I don't want to lay a hand on them. After you are freed from here, you have to give them a good spanking for me. Doesn't have to be much, just enough so that they won't be able to climb down from bed for a month." I mulled awhile. "Right, there's one that you must give special treatment to so that he won't be able to climb down from bed for at least three months. I'll give you the details later..."

5 The darkness that Sansheng keeps referring to is this yin, where yin is the force of darkness while yang is the force of light. But yin-yang is also the duality of male-female, and although they are indeed talking about sex in this case, they are talking about it with a specific Daoist context where it was believed that sexual intercourse would keep the two forces in balance and lead to a healthy life, not merely as a euphemism.

6 She's trying to say the Chinese proverb 踏破铁鞋无觅处，得来全不费功夫. Your iron shoes get worn out but you still can't find the thing you're looking for. Then when you're not looking, it comes to you on its own.

07: The Thousand-Lock Pagoda has been destroyed

In this incarnation, the Imperial Reverend was a wolf demon named Hu'yi.

I jumped up and down to tear the talismans off of him while he looked at me with increasingly amazed eyes that at length betrayed a trace of apprehension.

“How is this humanly possible?” he asked.

I ruffled my hair, waved my hand to break the large chains, and then answered with some woe: “Well, I’m not technically human.”

The iron links broke into pieces and fell to the bottom of the Thousand-Lock his heart was singing in joy. I snapped my fingers and said to him, “Just help me with this and you’ll be free to go. C’mon!”

But Hu’yi was silent for a time. “One can only enter the Thousand-Lock Pagoda of Liubo; he cannot leave it.”

“Can’t leave?” I looked at him incredulously. “I haven’t spent a lot of time in the human world, but I at least know one cannot be forced into a sale. Only letting in but not letting out is just as ridiculous as a bad return policy. Aren’t the priests of Liubo being a little unreasonable?”

“So what if it’s ridiculous? In this world, the stronger ones get the last word.”

“I like the sound of that.” I laughed. “Alright then, let’s destroy this pagoda, shall we?”

He looked at me in surprise.

I grinned at him from ear to ear: “The stronger ones have the last word, you say?”

Much later, Yanwang was taken over with passion when he talked to me about today’s event. “You really have a stone’s temperament, don’t you? You said you were going to destroy the Enchanted Lake and the Enchanted Pagoda and you really destroyed them just like that, upsetting the lake with darkness as strong as the Wangchuan’s. Do you know how many punishments Lord Moxi had had to secretly bear for you? Because of this, his next life was an ordeal to get through.”

But I had no idea what the future consequences were going to be at this very moment. On my own whims, I waved my hand and brought the lake into chaos.

All of Liubo was shaken that evening as the students were awakened from their sleep. Then... the children of Mount Liubo were beaten to tears all night long.

The crying went on and on.

Out in the front, Hu'yi did the deed while I covered my mouth laughing in the back.

When we found Changwu, I patted Huyi's left shoulder: "Three months! Three!"

Hu'yi got my meaning, flew to Changwu, pulled down his pants in front of everyone and gave him two spanks. Changwu's buttocks got severely swollen. This normally vicious kid was now scared silly. Only until the pain set in did his tears start to gush out along with his loud wails.

I watched in glee but I began to feel a little bad for him. I gave his swollen butt two extra kicks before waving my hand signaling Hu'yi to let him go.

Hu'yi frowned.

"What?"

"You've just bound him to bed for six months."

"Oops!" I covered my mouth in surprise: "Did I kick too hard?"

He turned to look at me. "What do you think?"

I scratched my head and laughed wordlessly.

When he spotted the last kid who hadn't been spanked crouching and crying in the corner, Hu'yi turned around to grab him. I quickly pulled Hu'yi back. "Don't spank..." this child.

I hadn't completed my sentence by the time a thunder suddenly rumbled in the sky. Hu'yi and I jumped away, both gazing heavenward.

The warming seal on my wrist was the only thing I needed to sense the newcomer's arrival.

It was Moxi, or Venerable Zhonghua as he was called in this lifetime.

He frowned when saw the children lying all over the courtyard holding their behinds in tears. His eyes swept to me and then at last fell upon Hu'yi. Chills crept over me while the two exchanged gazes.

Behind Moxi, dozens of shadows quickly rushed forth – the masters and elders of Liubo.

The elders were exceedingly distressed on their disciples' behalf. Everyone's expression altered upon hearing the crying sounds. The second they saw me and Hu'yi, their faces went livid. The scene turned a little chaotic momentarily.

They made a commotion while I poked my ears in annoyance. I said to Hu'yi, "I'll keep my words. Since you've helped me vent, I'll help you regain your freedom. It's obvious to me you don't like to stay here. Go, to wherever it is you want."

Hu'yi hadn't replied by the time a white-bearded foggy stood up and came out as he pointed at us in condemnation: "Is Liubo somewhere you can come and go as you please?! Demon Hu'yi! His Most Reverend had spared your life in thought of old ties, but why have you done these things to insult Liubo?"

I picked up a few things after mulling over these words. Firstly, Hu'yi had known Moxi in the past; secondly, Hu'yi had perhaps been locked up in the pagoda by Moxi; thirdly... despite hating demons so much, Moxe hadn't killed Hu'yi. There must be untold matters in all of this!

I crossed my arms in front of my chest and stood on the sidelines watching the play unfold. There was unfortunately no place to sit down, nor food to snack on. It had taken away some of my enjoyment.

Hu'yi sneered: "I've never asked your venerable Reverend to let me live while imprisoning me for life. I'd rather die and be reborn again to free myself from this living hell."

Hear, hear.

"Ungrateful demon!" Thus spoke, he drew his sword from its scabbard and flew over as if to kill Hu'yi.

I was the one who let Hu'yi go, yet he was still not free. This was the same as not having the goods I had promised my customer. If the goods were missing, then the deal would tank. I'd always been a person of integrity, of course I couldn't let this happen.

I pulled him behind me and took on the foggy's attack. It suddenly occurred to me that if he were to continue sticking around, he would only get in my way. I should make him leave as soon as possible. Grabbing Huyi's collar, I flung him into the air and told him: "Go!"

The forces of darkness struck his back and instantly vaulted him away; I wasn't sure where to...

There were several powerful-looking people who turned to chase after him. I gathered all my strength and screamed. A wave of violent darkness spread out, forcing them to cover their heads in pain. "If you want to catch him, choose another day," I said. "I've already made a deal with him today and I intend to keep my word.

I have to guarantee his safety in order to keep my end of the bargain."

"Heathen, cease your arrogant bluster!"

I grinned cheerfully at the redundant old foggy. "Whether I'm blustering or not, why don't you come and try?!"

My attitude made the rigid old man so angry that smoke was coming out of his ears

as he rushed to me with his sword. Meanwhile, in the distance suddenly sounded a panicking call: "Master! Master!" A Liubo disciple was hurriedly riding in on the wind.

This disciple barely landed and had yet to find his footing before he rolled several times to finally reach the old man.

"Your Most Reverend Eminence! Master! The Thousand-Lock Pagoda... the Thousand-Lock Pagoda has been destroyed!"

I calmly raised an eyebrow while I watched the whole crowd changing their expressions. At length, their horrified eyes gradually shifted to me.

I blinked a few times, shrugged and said, "I swear I didn't expect that pagoda to be so flimsy. All I did was give it a few pokes..." Their stares were discomfiting me so much that I finally had to rub my head and give an uneasy laugh: "Haha, and it had turned into a pile of rubbish under the lake,ahaha..."

08: Perhaps it really was a tribulation of love

I had no intention to flee from Liubo after I destroyed the Thousand-Lock Pagoda.

Even if I didn't like this incarnation of Moxi's very much, I couldn't let him fall prey to other people. At the very least, I needed to protect him and his purity through this lifetime.

But the old fogies of Liubo didn't know what to do with me. Neither could they lock me away nor could they defeat me. That night, they lost a mighty lot of hair in distress.

In the end, it was my Moxi who resolutely said: "Lock her behind my residence. I'll personally keep an eye on her."

While the crowd hemmed and hawed, I was the first to nod my head, drawing a glower from Moxi.

Once I thought of our living together in the same compound, I generously let go of any complaints I might have had.

Liubo was presently regarded as the Holy Land of the religious community. The Venerable Zhonghua was head of Liubo. By this logic, his residence must not be too shabby.

But by the time I was brought back to his residence, I was almost moved to tears.

A tranquil plum garden that was somewhat incongruent with Liubo emerged behind his majestic residence. It wasn't yet winter, but the forest was covered in snow. Here, red blossoms flowered brilliantly, carrying their fragrance for miles after miles. Everything had apparently been created from magic.

"These... these flowers..." My voice sounded slightly shaky.

Unauthorized individuals were prohibited from entering Zhonghua's residence, so at this point, there were only the two of us. As he watched the garden filled with plum blossoms, his countenance greatly softened and he answered me in a much better mood: "It's one of the very few things I like."

I blinked back the mist in my eyes.

Moxi, Moxi, even though you had drunk Old Meng's soup, you hadn't forgotten this muted fragrance and the pureness of snow? You still remembered the quiet plum garden?

The garden was enclosed inside a force field Zhonghua had created to preserve the plum blossoms at their most beautiful on a winter day. Stepping into it was akin to stepping into his enchanted confinement.

I nevertheless gladly let him confine me.

Seeing me walk into his spell, Moxi wasted no words before indifferently turning around to leave. I gazed after his back while gently touching the snow-capped plums. I suddenly returned to a day long, long ago when the white-bearded priest had said to me to the knowing nods of his head: “Love trial.”

Perhaps it really was a tribulation of love.

A stone’s tribulation of love...

Time began to go by in utter ennui after several days of confinement. No matter how beautiful this scenery was, I became sick and tired of looking at it. I thought of asking Moxi to give me a few books so I could keep myself entertained, but I didn’t even get to see his shadow after several days of lurking by the force field’s boundary. I was awfully disappointed.

Day after day, I sprawled out by the force field’s boundary to trace circles and call

Moxi’s name. Of course, the name I called was ‘Zhonghua’.

In spite of my untiring effort, he never once appeared.

But when I finally quit calling him, it only took him a few days to show up.

At that time, I was learning the ancient art of steeping tea using melted snow. Of course, I had no tea, so I cut down a plum bough and used the branch as firewood while cooking the flowers, trying to see whether that many blossoms would yield a pot of porridge.

While I was wondering whether I should cut down another bough, Zhonghua arrived with a forbidding expression on his face.

I waved to him beatifically.

He briskly strode over and glanced at the plum tree I had uprooted, asking: “Are you cooking plum blossoms?”

“Wouldn’t you say this is a lovely activity, Venerable?”

He scoffed: “Is burning the lyre and cooking the crane[7] something delightful in your eyes?”

“Well now,” I began in seriousness, “we still have to see what kind of wood the lyre was made from. Good wood will naturally result in fragrant grilled meat. That crane also can’t be too old. Otherwise, killing it wouldn’t be very kosher.”

He took a deep breath and only said after calming down: “You’re not allowed to touch any more of my plums.”

“No can do.” I shook my head with a sense of rightness. Seeing that his face was about to explode, I explained: “It’s boredom that killed your plums. If I weren’t so bored, I wouldn’t have paid attention to them. I stood there yelling by the force field’s wall for days on out but why didn’t you answer me?”

“What is it that you want?”

“Books. The latest ones. As well as melon seeds and green tea.”

“We don’t serve people here at Liubo,” he said while turning away.

“They must not have grown so easily, but I bet these many trees should be enough to last me a few days.”

The departing figure slightly paused.

When I woke up the next morning, a heap of books was lying on the ground.

I flipped these books open as I muffled my giggle. Moxi, Moxi, you are so adorably stuffy in this lifetime!

My days went by much better with these books as company. After all, I had spent so many wasteful days in the underworld, I might as well guard Moxi here in the company of red plums and white snow.

One fine day, I was suddenly in the mood for a walk. I took a book with me as I strolled under the shadows of the forest, taking in the plum fragrance all the while.

I startingly felt as though I was returning to an existence from a time long past. I had lazily stayed at home all day. Then, Moxi came home from school. He pushed the door open, letting sunlight flood in, and softly called to me: "Sansheng."

Enjoying the residual sound of this precious memory, I closed my eyes imagining the former Moxi right by my side. He matched my stride whenever I took a step, just enough so that I could have a place to lean on whenever I wished to.

I walked and paused, walked and paused, as if Moxi was there to follow my every step. I opened my eyes. Red plums were still standing proudly against the snow before my eyes, but when I looked back, I was startled to find Moxi really standing among the plums, watching me intently since Heaven knows when.

I smiled happily while swallowing back the word "Moxi" on the tip of my tongue in exchange for "Zhonghua." Ignoring his barely perceptible frown, I cheerfully whirled my way to him with open arms.

He leaned to the side to avoid me. Instead of hugging empty air as I had thought, I felt myself hugging a small, violently trembling figure. I held this little thing out at arm's length for a look and was quite surprised at my discovery: "Chang'an! What are you doing here?"

This was the little priest who thought I wanted to pluck his yang in order to nourish my yin. He looked so much like the former Moxi that I never could help myself from adoring him.

Unable to do anything but shake, he didn't offer me an answer.

I gave Moxi a questioning look. He stared at Chang'an before coldly uttering:

“Reflect on your wrongdoings,” then waved his sleeves and turned to leave.

When he saw him leaving, Chang'an desperately broke away from me to run after him, sprawling on the ground while crying in snots and tears. “Your Most Reverend! Your Most Reverend! Don't leave me here by myself! I don't want to die! I don't want to die!”

I wiped my sweat. What did I even do to deserve this? When we spanked the little priests last time, didn't I only let him go? But now the ungrateful kid was this afraid of me?

Moxi waved his sleeve and helped Chang'an up. Scarcely giving me a glance, he said, “One month of self-reflection is already lenient considering you had fought with your fellow classmate to the point of severely injuring him. Stop crying, it's a disgrace.”

I blinked rapidly, coming to understand Moxi's intention. Thinking back, my conduct for the past few days must have convinced him that I wasn't really a murderous demon. This was how he could assuredly throw his errant student here to scare him with my notoriety.

What could I do but bewail my own grievances?

Moxi brushed his robe and easily went away, leaving Chang'an lying on the floor crying till his whole body convulsed.

I gave his head a poke. He looked up to me with swollen eyes. I kindly smiled to him: “Let's talk?”

After struggling to talk to him for half a day, coaxing and tricking, I finally got why he was sent here.

If we were to talk about this, then we'd have to begin from the time I brought the Thousand-Lock Pagoda down to free the wolf demon. I had thought he would know to run far away once I let him go and bury that proverbial hatchet. Who knew that wolf demon would be so stubborn. He not only didn't hide, he even assembled a group of demons who bore grudges against Liubo to destroy it in one fell swoop.

Once they knew of the wolf demon's sinister plan, Liubo naturally could not sit still to await its own demise. A decision was thus made to gather the leaders of other major monastic sects to jointly come up with a defensive plan.

It was against this backdrop that Changan's story began. It was said that when the little priests of Liubo were preparing for tomorrow's banquet, Changwu who was spanked by me last time was still recuperating in bed. He was so bored that he made a fuss about wanting to eat the fruits reserved for the banquet guests. When he happened to see Chang'an pass by with the fruits, he wanted to ask for one.

Chang'an, being an honest child, refused. The back and forth argument eventually turned into a larger fight, and when Chang'an couldn't hold himself back any longer, he ended up pushing Changwu.

Because Changwu was already injured, his head busted when he got pushed down hysterically, Chang'an had no way to defend himself...

And so here he was.

It was extremely upsetting to see the face that looked so much like Moxi's from the last lifetime crying in snots and tears. I tried all sorts of ways to pacify him, even vowing to take revenge for him. He finally stopped crying, and after sniffing for a long while, asked me, "You're... you're so good to me because you want to wash

me clean, then... then pick me, right?"

My mouth twitched. I really wanted to know what kind of ideas his master normally stuffed in his head. I pinched his chubby cheeks, smiling deviously. "Of course. But I just want to pick your venerable Reverend. I want to pick him clean, pick till he's exhausted to death!"

"His, His Most Reverend..."

I placed my hands over my heart and said with all the affection in the world: "That's right, you're a quite good-looking chap, though unfortunately still too little. Your Most Reverend, on the other hand, has

long taken over my heart. My heart is filled with his presence, my mind is filled with his grace. I think of his voice before going to sleep, I think of his face the moment I rise. I miss him like crazy whenever I don't get to see him, but when I do see him my heart thrums wild. Heaven knows how long my heart has been his. I'm head over heels in love with him, and I don't know how to stop. I just want to tell him how I feel..."

"His Most Reverend." Chang'an pointed behind me.

I looked back, but all I saw was a pure white robe skirting by the plum trees, bringing the snow on a plum bough floating down. He left in such a hurry that I couldn't even detect his figure.

And then he was gone...

"Was it really your venerable Reverend? The Venerable Zhonghua?"

Chang'an nodded, thought for a moment and then said, "When he left, his face was red."

Baffled, I sighed softly while muttering: "Moxi, Moxi, how did you become so useless in this lifetime? All I did was confess to you..."

Although the nights were cold here, they weren't quite freezing. I had always lived by the Wangchuan, so I didn't fear the cold. But Chang'an was different. No matter how gifted he was, he was still only a human. I laid out a quilt for him in the small cabin, lit the firewood, and then spent the night outside.

Why go outside? Obviously because if that child saw me next to him, he'd never go to sleep!

After all, I was a kind spiritual being.

When I woke up the next morning, I was surprised to see Chang'an holding a quilt over me. Seeing me opening my eyes, he gave a start, shook like a leaf, and kept backing away. He staggered for a few steps before falling over awkwardly. I sat up he stumbled and ran away.

My hand suspended in the air as my veins popped blue. I wanted to suppress my irritation down but I just couldn't. As profanity was about to leave my mouth, he poked his head out and said to me: "Umm... umm, you can sleep inside the house tonight. It's cold out..."

I stared at him quietly for a moment before sighing: "My name is Sansheng."

He blinked. Only after a long time did he timidly try to call me: "San... Sansheng."

Pleased, I nodded and went inside the house to find the book Zhonghua had sent me a few days ago, then leaned against a plum tree to read in comfort. This was a tale of a romantic reunion, of a broken mirror whose pieces eventually rejoined. I was in the exact mood for it, and was therefore very invested in my reading.

I ignored Chang'an and he naturally did not dare to disturb me. The day went by very peacefully... if not for tonight's banquet, that is.

With the wolf demon's retaliation approaching, Liubo's banquet to gather the major sects was scheduled for today.

I finished my book by the time night fell. When I looked up, I found Mount Liubo awash in light. It was so bright that even the sky was illuminated.

Good grief, Zhonghua's sorcery for making force fields was so good that he had really given me no hole to crawl out from. Besides seducing Moxi, eavesdropping was my second biggest interest. I had so much time on my hand that I was bored enough to take a stroll around the plum forest. But when I detected no loopholes, I gave up and turned around to wash for bed.

Just then, I saw two white figures flashing across the back door of the main hall.

Curious, I took a closer look. Hey! Aren't they Venerable Zhonghua and the nun who was called 'grandmaster'...?

At this point, I saw the nun pulling on Zhonghua's sleeve. There was an urgency on her countenance but since Zhonghua's face was hidden in the shadows, I could not see his very clearly. They were making my imagination run wild...

I inwardly gritted my teeth and fisted my hands. What are you two trying to do?!

7 an idiom used to mean the desecration of sacred things

09: Did we use to know each other?

Hidden in the shadows of the night, I listened to their conversation while staying crouched behind a plum tree.

"Senior!" the nun was saying with some urgency. "The wolf demon is coming to invade us. Why are you allowing that demoness with unknown origins to remain here? Shouldn't we exterminate her as soon as possible?"

I sighed. I'd already said this a thousand times. Yes, my origins aren't clear, but I'm really not a monster! I had even destroyed that Thousand-Lock Pagoda of yours, had I still not proven my identity?! Oh, the stupidity! Humans are such idiots!

Even though I hadn't finished grumbling, I noticed that Zhonghua was getting fairly affected. "We'll discuss this another day." His voice was slightly hoarse and weak, as though he had had too much to drink.

He was drunk.

The nun still wouldn't let it go. "Senior, don't tell me you've come to care for the demon because of her vulnerable façade."

Zhonghua was getting angry. He brushed her hand off and snapped: “What nonsense are you uttering?!”

“Let’s hope I’m just uttering nonsense.” She then coldly continued: “Senior, I’m sure you haven’t forgotten. In the beginning, it was precisely because Master was softhearted that she had accepted that low-class wolf demon called Hu’yi. It ultimately led to Liubo’s crisis twenty years ago. Qingling prays that you won’t follow our master’s footsteps.”

After a length of silence, Zhonghua waved his hand and told her: “Go back.”

I pursed my lips in thought. From what the nun had just said, the wolf demon named Hu’yi had perhaps been the disloyal and betraying kind that pays kindness with misdeed. Based on my experience of inspecting countless ghosts by the Wangchuan River, however, that isn’t what he was.

There had to be untold tales in the story twenty years ago!

After the nun named Qingling left, Zhonghua stood by himself in the dark corner for a while before leaning on the wall and slowly finding his way back to his bedchamber.

I heaved a sigh as I watched his forlorn shadow.

In the past, whenever Moxi stumbled and fell, I was always there to protect my baby and feel his pain. I had never let him suffer any loneliness or be hurt in any way. Yet now that he had become the high and mighty Venerable Zhonghua, he didn’t have a single helper by his side when he got drunk. He might not even be as comfortable as Chang’an who was sleeping in my room.

“Who’s there?” He sharply turned around.

I blinked a few times, increasingly convinced that he must be living a very tiring life from day to day. If even my soft sigh could catch his

attention after he was this drunk, his wariness on a normal basis must be layers thick.

Hearing no answer, Zhonghua straightened up and slowly made his way to this side.

I knew I couldn't hide, so I openly stepped out and greeted him with a smile. "Oh! Good evening!"

When he saw me, his brow severely scrunched up before turning to leave, as though he had seen something extremely revolting. He walked with long strides, no longer staggering drunkenly this time.

I froze for a moment, suddenly becoming furious. Am I so hideous that you have to run away from me like that?

"Stop!" I yelled out.

His pace gained even more speed. It only took two steps before he completely disappeared from sight.

My anger flared up. Hiding from me? I'd like to see how you'll hide from me!

I rushed back to the dilapidated hut and pulled a soundly sleeping Chang'an out from under the quilt. He blinked blearily at me, disoriented and confused. I gave him a toothy grin. "Chang'an, can you help me with something?"

Only now did he turn to look at me. He froze for a moment, screamed in fright, and then attempted to wrap himself up in a panic so that I wouldn't see him.

I sternly dragged him out by his collar and brought him to a spot closest to Zhonghua's bedchamber. Patting his tear-stained face, I told him: "Cry, cry as loud as you can!"

He stared at me blankly.

My lips upturned into a smile that was as radiant as it was lewd.
“Although your yang is a bit small, it’s still better than nothing. And though my heart already belongs to your venerable Reverend, it’s a bit difficult to control my desire when I look at a boy as handsome as you. Won’t you indulge me today?”

Chang’an was scared stiff, as if he had been struck by lightning.

I guess that was to be expected. In the middle of the night, an unfamiliar female had broken into his room, abducted him and said she wanted to molest him. Any sane person would be shocked. I very graciously allowed him a second of stupefaction, after which, I satisfyingly heard him give a shrieking scream.

“No!” Petrified, he crawled to the edge of the force field, banging on the force field’s wall screaming: “Save me, Your Most Reverend! Save me! Chang’an is still too young! Chang’an doesn’t want to die!”

He wailed and wailed. His venerable Reverend finally clutched his forehead and came out with a glowering face. He frowningly stared at Chang’an and then growled: “Good for you!”

If you asked me, as a Most Reverend, your running away the moment you saw me wasn’t any better.

I smirked and kicked Chang’an in the butt while he was lying sprawled out on the ground. “Alright, since your venerable Reverend is here to replace you, I’ll let you off the hook this time. Go back to bed.”

Chang’an looked up to Zhonghua, then looked back at me. Seeing tacit acquiescence from the both of us, he quickly scrambled up and ran away without once turning back.

I looked at Zhonghua, smiling smugly. He rubbed his forehead, closed his eyes and did not return my eye contact. “What is it?”

“Nothing.”

The veins on the back of his hand popped blue. He said nothing more and turned to go.

Before he could leave the force field, I hurried to grab his sleeve. Maybe because he was drunk, his much slower reaction had allowed me to catch him. “Why are you hiding from me? I’m not going to eat you.”

“Why should I be hiding?” he said. “You’re Liubo’s prisoner...”

“Exactly, I’m the one imprisoned. If anyone were to hide, I’d be the one hiding from you. Why are you doing this? Do I have boils or fur growing on my face? Are maggots going to fester in your eyes if you take one look at me? Are you going to suffer vomiting and diarrhea? Are you going to bleed to death? Are you g...”

Before I could finish, he took a deep breath, turned around and looked at me. It was a simple and honest gaze that showed both his obstinacy and a desire to prove himself. But I wasn’t as simple as he was.

I saw in his clear orbs the images of a starry sky, of white snowflakes and fragrant plums, and of myself.

All deeply imprinted in his eyes.

It had been so long since I last saw him looking so intently at me this way. I couldn’t help but step forward and lean into him. My hands slid down from his sleeve to take hold of his hand.

I saw myself quietly smiling in his eyes. He didn’t break away from me, his gaze softening. My smile widened.

“With this muted fragrance and pure white snow, and even you, there’s nothing more Sansheng asks for.”

With this muted fragrance and pure white snow, and even Sansheng, there’s nothing more Moxi asks for. They were words Moxi had said to me in the last lifetime.

He was slightly startled upon hearing these words. A frown. Then suddenly looking to have recovered, he abruptly pushed me away and, as a result, landed himself onto the snow due to not having stood firmly. He appeared to be in a slight panic.

I wanted to go over to help him, but he blocked me with his hand. Clutching his head, he sat in the snow silently.

“Mo... Zhonghua, you...”

“Did we use to know each other?”

How was I supposed to answer that? Yes, we knew each other. Where? In the underworld, by the Wangchuan River... If I said that, he would only think I was joking.

I scratched my head, saying: “Well, if you think I look familiar, then this must be fate. Yes, fate!”

“Fate?” He sneered ironically. “How does this world have so many fates...?”

Hearing him say a line as though he had seen all there was to see in the ways of the world, I knitted my brow and asked, “And why not? Our meeting each other is fate.

To be here chatting is also fate.” For a stone like me to be able to go to the mortal world to seduce you is an even bigger fate. Of course, I swallowed these words back and did not say them to him.

He lay in the snow. Under the moonlight, he took a good look at me and, after a long while, lightly uttered two words: “Cursed fate.”

I inwardly nodded. Cursed fates are still fates. They are even more lasting and persistent than ordinary fates. I was delighted, but then I thought, that wasn’t right.

From the way he sounded, I needed to react with disdain. I mustn't smile so that I could make him wait in vain. Moreover... I glanced at his posture lying in the snow.

It was such a convenient posture to jump him!

I pointed at him prettily. "Y... y... you! You are most exasperating!"

He narrowed his eyes, his expression becoming indecipherable.

I turned around as if I was leaving in indignation. When I got to him, I yelled out:

"Whoa! Why is it so slippery?"

I pulled what I thought was a beautiful pose and slipped and fell on top of him.

Being a precisely calculated movement, I should've fallen onto his chest, enacting the scene of a shy maiden lying in the hero's embrace.

Little did I know I also slipped the same way Zhonghua did, crashing on top of him in a graceless position and knocking my head onto his. Unfortunately, my lips did not meet his, but smacked right onto his forehead instead.

I only heard the man underneath sounding a grunt and giving no more reaction forthwith.

By the time I clutched my head and clambered to get up, Zhonghua was lying on the ground with both of his eyes closed. There were two bleeding holes my rock like front teeth had left on his forehead.

"Umm..." I haltingly reached my hand out to touch him. "Hey..." I patted his cheek but he still didn't respond. I panicked a little. I couldn't have sent him straight to Yanwang, could I have? But he hadn't gone through his tribulation in this lifetime yet. There was going to be huge trouble this way.

“Zhonghua! Zhonghua! It can’t be that bad, right?!” I scratched my head. You are, no matter what, His Most Reverend. If you actually got knocked to death by a woman like me, this, this... if this got out, it’d be really humiliating. I hurried to pinch his Renzhong acupoint while muttering: “Moxi, don’t get me into trouble. I’ll really be condemned by the heavens for knocking a god on his trial dead. Moxi...”

I tearfully called his name for a while. He seemed to understand my dilemma for he soon groaned and then slowly opened his eyes. I elatedly sent my grateful prayers to Yanwang over and over again.

“Master...” he quietly said as he looked at me.

I froze, only now smelling the strong alcohol in his breath. I reckoned alcohol had gone to his head and he had lost his cognizance.

“Master,” he called again, “why...”

He spoke so softly that I couldn’t hear him at all. “What is it?” I leaned in and pressed my ear against his lips to listen more carefully. However, his words made my mind blurred for a moment. “Why did you develop those sorts of feelings for Hu’yi?” he asked.

“Was your master a man or a woman? Did your master fall in love with Hu’yi? How far did they get? What happened to them? Why was Hu’yi locked up in the pagoda? And where’s your master now?” I asked as subtly as I could, and then blinked while quietly awaiting Zhonghua’s answers.

But his head fell to the side, asleep.

I squeezed my fists.

The feeling of unsatisfied curiosity made me want to poke the two holes on his forehead. But looking at his peaceful sleeping face, I finally sighed and resignedly tore my skirt into strips to bandage his wounds for him.

Since Chang'an was sleeping inside, dragging his revered Reverend in wouldn't be very prudent. It wouldn't be very convenient to have my ways with him either.

I mulled for a bit, then dragged him under a plum tree and let him rest on my lap.

As for me, I leaned against the tree, caressed his forehead, took his hands in mine, and lastly placed a kiss on his lips, then fell into the most carefree sleep that I'd had in a long while.

The next morning when I woke up, I saw a pair of clear eyes staring at me. I smiled at him and waved hello: "Good morning, Your Most Reverend! You're still here?"

He shut his eyes and took a deep breath, looking as though he was trying his best to keep calm. At long last, he said to me with some restraint: "Untie me."

I laughed uneasily, untied the rope that was yoking his neck to my leg, and innocently said, "Can you blame me? I was afraid you'd run away."

Not waiting for me to completely untie the rope, he struggled to his feet and scowled at me.

I spread my hands in helplessness. "I knew you'd run away after you wake up and then deny the fact that we've spent the night together. That's why I've placed more than a dozen spells on the rope. That's the only way to prove that you have really slept with me last night. By the rules of the humans, take responsibility, Mo... Zhonghua."

Each time I spit out a word, his face would darken by the second, and then by the end of my speech there was even a rare shade of red in all that blackness: "Sh... sh... shame..."

He couldn't manage a complete sentence even after trembling for a long time. I helped him out with a sigh: "Shameless." Being able to make the ice-faced Reverend this angry was an incredibly proud accomplishment.

“It’s all the same whether I’m shameless or not. Zhonghua, you still have to marry me.”

He looked at me for a moment, seeming to have calmed down. His expression gradually chilled. “Even if I were drunk, I can clearly remember everything I did. You and I are not the same kind. How could I have done that sort of thing with you?”

I asked curiously, “So you can’t do it if you’re not the same kind? Then what about your master and Hu’yi?”

Zhonghua’s expression suddenly iced over. He looked as though he could mince me into pieces. He stormed away. I was a stubborn rock. If I didn’t get a clear answer now, I wouldn’t be able to sleep tonight. I hurriedly caught up to his side and yell out to him: “Hey! What about your master and Hu’yi? What was going on with them? Your master...”

A flash of fury grazed my ears, striking the snow behind me and sending snow dust whirling in the air.

I froze on the spot.

“Hold your tongue.” He icily threw these words at me before turning around to leave.

Moxi had never looked at me that way. Even when he hurled a fireball at my feet when we were last in the underworld, he didn’t have such a chilly expression.

I’d only seen that expression from him once before. It was in the last lifetime when two thugs broke into our house and harassed me that he had put on that face.

He seemed to intensely hate hearing anyone speak of his master and Hu’yi. Perhaps besides physiological discrimination, his hatred for Hu’yi was also emotionally seated. It seemed he cared very much for his master...

His feelings toward his master might have even been a little... not so ordinary.

I thus became ever more curious as to whether his master was a man or a woman.

10: You are really unlikeable in this lifetime

I didn't see Zhonghua again after that day. He seemed to be very angry with me. Or perhaps it's more accurate to say he had never liked me in this lifetime.

Chang'an was still too young that I couldn't mine any information from him.

Nonetheless, he was able to solve the biggest question in my mind – Zhonghua's master was a woman.

A woman.

After hearing this, I suddenly felt as though I had been betrayed. He clearly said he'd only let me seduce him. I had been seducing him with such perseverance, yet he was...

I was so upset that I stopped running to the force field's boundary and shouting his name.

This went on until the day Liubo's sky darkened with a miasma so thick that it kept me wide awake. I knew then that Hu'yi was attacking.

Chang'an was as anxious as an ant crawling on charcoals, crying that he would live and die with Liubo. Annoyed with his blabbering, I knocked him unconscious and locked him in the house. Soon after my stroll in the forest, I began to hear the commotion of fighting on the other side.

Le sigh, humans are so strange. If they wanted to kill each other, then they should just do it. Why must they torture my ears with their

screams? They acted as if screaming could slay their opponents on the spot.

A loud boom went off at the same time the force field was reduced to ashes after suddenly lighting up. Someone floated in the air – his robe black and his long hair flowing. Hu'yi. He swept his eyes across the plum forest. When he detected me, he landed and said, "I've never liked owing anyone anything. You freed me, now I'll free you. We are even from now on."

Le sigh X 2. He was the Imperial Reverend's reincarnation, no question about it. This habit of giving people unsolicited grace was exactly the same.

As I was about to open my mouth to say I wouldn't go, a cold voice came behind us: "The both of you should give up dreaming about leaving Liubo."

I turned around. Zhonghua was pointing his sword at Hu'yi, his face frigid: "Twenty years ago I had spared your life, yet how dare you attack Liubo! I shall send you to your end today."

I watched the expression on his face as the uncomfortable feeling in me escalated.

I retreated two steps and hid behind Hu'yi, turning away from him.

Hu'yi stared at Zhonghua with something like a sneer. "I've no need for your favors.

You can easily kill me now that you have become The Most Reverend. But can those Liubo students of yours withstand the attack of the monsters waiting outside? Is everyone who seeks divinity as powerful as you?"

The murderous look on Zhonghua's face intensified.

Hu'yi again spoke: "Zhonghua, if you can just promise me one thing, I will in turn assure you of a way for Liubo to repel the demons without

hurting one soul. On top of that, my life will be yours to deal as you wish.”

Even I was surprised after listening to him, much less Zhonghua. He spent this much effort to attack Liubo just so he could give himself a bargaining chip against

Zhonghua? Suddenly, I became extremely curious about his request.

Zhonghua was silent for a moment. “What is it?”

“Free her so she can be reborn.” There seemed to be suppressed anger and sorrow in Huyi’s strained voice. “She should have been laid to rest a long time ago. Let her go!”

Upon hearing these words, Zhonghua’s face iced up even worse. “That’s out of the question.”

Hu’yi became infuriated. “No matter what, she had once been your master. She had taught and raised you up! You people have imprisoned her for twenty years. If this drags on any longer, she will cease to exist! Zhonghua, have you forged your heart into steel?”

I raised an eyebrow and glanced askance at Zhonghua, but all I saw was an expressionless face. “She fell in love with a demon and betrayed Liubo, leading to our suffering of a calamity. By our rules, she ought to be punished by having her soul locked away.”

Having her soul locked away. That meant her soul was bound so that it could not be taken away by the messenger ghosts, being held in the living world until it depletes to nothing. For souls, being trapped in the human world was an extremely cruel punishment. That was because once the soul evaporated, it would never again enter reincarnation. Nevertheless, this sorcery was as ordinary as ordinary could be in the underworld. That was because everything in the underworld was either a soul or a spirit. Messenger ghosts regularly used this spell on those who had sinned to bring them to trial before Yanwang.

I had assumed this sorcery was unknown in the human world, not expecting it was actually passed down through generations at Liubo.

Twenty years. That was enough to turn a soul to ashes...

Hu'yi gripped his fists.

I wondered for a moment. It was sacrilegious to lock away a living soul. As it was, Zhonghua hated Hu'yi and vice versa. This was likely his 'meet though in enmity' tribulation. At this point, if he didn't let Hu'yi release the soul, when it dissipated in due time, Zhonghua would certainly be struck by 36 bolts of lightning. With his present body made of flesh and blood, I feared he wouldn't even be able to withstand one strike.

At this thought, I patted Huyi's shoulder: "What kind of soul is it? Do you know where they're trapping it?"

Hu'yi turned around to face me. Zhonghua's eyes were also on me as he said in utter contempt: "I suggest you don't stick your nose where it doesn't belong."

I pursed my lips, thinking to myself that this incarnation of Moxi's was terribly unpleasant. And yet I couldn't let him fail his trial just because he wasn't nice in this lifetime. If he got struck by lightning now, then whom am I going to seduce next time?!

"Where is she?" I asked Hu'yi again.

Huyi's eyes lit up. He had seen me destroy the entire Thousand-Lock Pagoda with one huff of breath. Too desperate at the moment to doubt me, he pointed to a tall and magnificent tower not too far from here and said, "At the top of the Million Story Tower. But she will still need someone to lead the way after breaking free..."

The Thousand-Lock Pagoda, the Million-Story Tower, were they supposed to never meet in life...? This was a little too cruel. I patted his shoulder telling him to rest assured, at the same time glancing at Zhonghua's increasingly murderous intent.

“Stall him.” Clashes began to sound behind me. I ignored them, only hoping Hu’yi could buy a little more time.

I was born in the underworld. Even though I wasn’t a messenger ghost, I was born knowing how to escort spirits... maybe just not very professionally.

After climbing to the top of the Million-Story Tower, I noticed a memorial tablet standing on the incense altar in the middle of an open space. Nothing was written on it, but it was very clean. It was apparent someone often came by to dust it.

I looked around without finding where Zhonghua’s master’s soul was locked. While I was scratching my head, I suddenly caught a tiny glimmer shining down from above. I looked up to the light where I saw a candle fixed on the ceiling beam. Above it was a painting – someone’s portrait, it seemed.

I jumped onto the beam and carefully studied that painting.

It was depicting a woman dressed in white from the back. Her apparel didn’t differ too much from what the priests at Zhonghua’s place were wearing nowadays. She was holding onto a branch of plum blossoms while slightly leaning forward, as if to smell the flowers.

My heart caught.

If I hadn’t seen the inscription beneath, I would’ve thought it was a portrait Moxi had painted for me and which had survived till now from our past life. “Drawn in the 10th year of Zhengwu, at Shili Pavilion, Liubo.”

Linking these matters together, it wasn’t difficult to guess that the person in this painting was Zhonghua’s master.

I couldn’t believe his master resembled me this much... thus that sense of betrayal from before quickly went away.

If the portrait was here, then... I was just about to reach out and touch the painting when a golden light gleamed and pushed me backward.

A force field.

The woman's soul must have been locked in there. I gathered spiritual forces into my palm and then struck the force field. The golden light flickered twice before it disappeared. I joyfully brought the painting down. As expected, a white mass was found inside.

I'd seen many souls before but I'd never seen one so weak. If I had been a few days late, this thing would've completely died out. I recited an incantation that easily released the soul-locking spell. I placed her in my palm and gently breathed into her so that she would not dissipate on her way to the underworld.

Holding her, I jumped to the top of the tall tower and released her to the sky. She did not go, however. She lingered in the air as if she was trying to remain at Liubo for as long as she could.

"Go," I told her. "Everything in this life has become a thing of the past. Even if it's hard to let go, you cannot return." I thought some more and said, "The ghosts in the underworld are very nice. Tell them you know Sansheng. They might be able to get you through the back door."

The spirit hesitated a little, and then slowly drifted down. I stared after her while she floated toward Zhonghua's residence.

The view was excellent from here. I looked to the distance where Zhonghua's and Huyi's fighting figures could be seen. Hu'yi was obviously at a disadvantage, but if he were desperate enough, Zhonghua wouldn't have it easy either. Appearing to have been riled by the entanglement, Zhonghua drew his sword.

Hu'yi was about to dodge when, all of a sudden, he shook violently and did not avoid Zhonghua's sword, letting the cold blade drill straight into his heart and through his chest.

I think I knew then what he saw. I also knew he must be smiling.

I waved to the two souls, sending them off to reincarnation. Together, they would see the cluster amaryllises and would perhaps even engrave their names on my stone.

From the Million-Story Tower, I stood watching them leave. When I turned my gaze,

I sensed a savage violence aiming at me. In the distance, Zhonghua was glaring ominously. I suddenly recalled the first thing he said to me when we met in this lifetime: "If you aren't our kind, then you are different."

If I thought about it, my mind was indeed a little 'different' from his in this life. First, I had destroyed his Thousand-Lock Pagoda and freed the wolf demon Hu'yi, leading to the attacking of Liubo by the demonic army. Now, I was freeing his master and allowing the master he loved to reincarnate with Hu'yi.

The Venerable Zhonghua must really despise me!

As I was giving him a smile, I abruptly caught a glimpse of a snake demon opening the cabin door not far from the plum forest. My heart shook with fear. Chang'an was still inside!

Without any time to think, I leapt and made a dash for the cabin. At the door, I saw Chang'an thrashing around in bed. Poking from his mouth was the tail of a small yellow snake, wagging creepily.

This type of snake demons loved children's innards. They would shapeshift back to their original forms and crawl into children's mouths until they had eaten all of their internal organs.

I took two steps forward, held down Chang'an, then grabbed his neck with one hand and the snake's tail with the other. I struck the snake with forces of darkness and killed it right in Changan's stomach, then slowly pulled it out from his mouth.

Out of the blue, chills ran down my spine as I heard a piercing sound ripping through my flesh.

I looked down at a sword that had impaled my stomach. Pain hadn't made its way to my brain. Who would want to kill me? I curiously wanted to know.

I turned to look. Zhonghua was staring at me threateningly: "I won't let you lay a hand on Liubo's..." Mid-sentence, his pupils narrowed in on the small yellow snake in my hand.

Deadly silence filled the room. Only Changan's vomiting sounded. He did not take long to vomit before he passed out.

"He looks so much like you did in the past that I didn't have the heart to..." I began slipping to the floor; in my throat was a taste of pungent sweetness. "I'm not a demon."

If it had been a mortal sword, then I wouldn't feel anything even with a few more stabs. Sadly, Zhonghua's sword was a blade that had been passed down from generation to generation of Liubo sect leaders. For a spiritual being from the underworld like me, it could be said to be my nemesis.

I felt my body slowly giving out and I finally couldn't stop myself from gripping onto his sleeve. I grinned: "You are so unlikable in this lifetime, you know."

Frozen, he gave me no reaction.

"But that day... my heart broke for you when you called for your master as you rested on my lap..."

Pain came, not only the pain from my wound, but also the burning sensation caused by the battling forces of darkness inside my body and of light from the sword. I tightly clenched his sleeve. Looking as though he had abruptly awakened from his trance, he picked me up and ran out. "There's medicine in the main hall."

It may have been an illusion, but I thought that the person carrying me was staggering in a way that was unlike his usual cold and staid appearance.

Why was this man so full of contradictions?

My vision gradually blurred.

After the force field was broken, the snow in the plum forest slowly melted away along with the steadily withering red plums, bringing the courtyard into dreariness.

I squinted at his profile and mustered up a cheerful smile. “Do you know why I like this muted fragrance and pure white snow?” I was murmuring at this point; even I did not hear myself. But he paused and looked down at me, the emotions in his dark eyes rolling.

At that moment, I almost thought he had broken the imprisonment of Old Meng’s soup to remember everything from the past. Then, I lapsed into darkness and saw my old acquaintances again in my trance.

I heard myself saying for the last time: “Will you say my name just once?”

He remained unspeaking.

So it turned out he didn’t even know my name in this lifetime...

The 3rd Lifetime: We Seek What We Shall Not Have

11: It's embarrassing to wheedle, Sansheng

My nape burned once again after the Black and White Guards of Impermanence escorted me back to the underworld. It was then that I realized Moxi and I only had one lifetime left.

This time, I didn't intend to wait for Moxi in the underworld anymore. I didn't want him to give me another 100 or 1000-year seal the next time we met. At the same time, I couldn't reincarnate too soon either, lest I give the people of Liubo a scare when I popped out in front of them just as Moxi had buried me.

I went to Yanwang's palace to ask him when Moxi would be arriving so that I could time my departure.

Before I could utter a word, Yanwang circled me twice, clucking all the while: "Tsk tsk, our Sansheng is quite capable!" Because he was too short, he could only pat my thigh in delight. "You've helped His Lordship pass his trial twice. Moreover, you've seduced him so successfully each time. The day our underworld sees the light of day is just around the corner! Ahahaha!"

I slapped away his wandering hand that was slowly creeping to my behind and asked, "When will Moxi come down here? I can't run into him this time."

Yanwang jumped onto his desk and flipped through the chaos of books on it. "Ah, here it is, here it is. This is it." Yanwang squinted his eyes to read for a second and then continued: "In Siming Xingjun's Book of Fate, it is written that Liubo's strength will greatly decline after Hu'yi rebels against them. In less than two years, Zhonghua will be murdered and will pass away in his bedchamber."

I was stunned. "Who's going to kill him?!"

"His junior, Qingling."

“That priestess?” I rubbed my chin. “Her watery eyes are filled with the tragic love hate of a spurned admirer. How can she kill Moxi?”

“Perhaps love bears hatred, and she destroys what she cannot have. Look, it says right here that after his master’s soul is freed by Hu’yi, Zhonghua drinks himself to distraction. Qingling confesses to him but gets rejected. She then resents him for it, kills him, and then commits suicide.”

I asked him in seriousness after pondering for a moment: “Yanwang, don’t tell me you were the one who came up with this soapy rubbish?”

Yanwang said in equal seriousness: “Lord Moxi’s fates are all personally written by Siming Xingjun, you know.”

I was made even more curious as to how sick that Siming Xingjun’s head was.

I went back to be a stone by the Wangchuan River. These two years quickly flew by.

When Jia and Yi left to the human world to escort spirits, I asked them to help me look out for news on Moxi. When they came back, they told me that it was true Liubo’s strength had greatly declined, it was true that Venerable Zhonghua drank every day, and it was also true the priestess named Qingling had turned love into hate. The Book of Fate, however, had failed to include the small detail that he was spending his drunken days in the snowy plum forest and that he had driven Liubo’s heirloom sword into a nameless grave like a piece of scrap metal.

Sealing his sword away and retreating to seclusion.

After listening to everything, I looked heavenward and burst out laughing in front of Jia’s and Yi’s aghast eyes.

“Sansheng, shouldn’t you be pained for him right now?” Jia asked.

I patted Jia’s shoulder. “No matter how he reincarnated, no matter what tribulation it was, Moxi still got seduced by me. I’m so proud of myself.

Moxi feeling bad by himself is good enough. All I need to do is put on a grin and wait to seduce him in his next life.”

Yi turned to the side and clasped his palms together in prayers.
“Amitabha. Good luck, Your Lordship.”

In a chipper mood, I went back to the stone and sat around for a few days. When I reckoned time was nearing, I dusted my butt and coolly went off to the human world.

After arriving in the human world, there were several times when I couldn’t help myself from wanting to go see him at Liubo, but I was able to barely restrain myself in the end. Then one day, I went to sit on the second floor of a restaurant to read.

In the story, the gentleman was reaching his hand under the lady’s dress, at which time the lady delicately cried: “Don’t,” and soon stripped off her own clothes, saying: “Let’s do this one step at a time.” I raised an eyebrow at how bold this lady

was. At this time, I suddenly heard a man exclaiming downstairs: “That can’t be true!”

I gazed down to see an old priest clutching a letter while trembling as though he was suffering epilepsy.

He broke out crying: “His Most Reverend has passed away! Liubo is dead! Our faith is dead!” His mournful cries gave people shivers. If I hadn’t known Zhonghua, I would have thought that they were involved in some unforgettable affair.

Zhonghua had finally left. I was determined to watch him grow up this time. I wasn’t going to let him have an unhappy childhood, nor would I let him have a chance to fall for other girls. I smiled wickedly. I was going to wrap him around my finger for sure this time.

At present, his trial was ‘seeking what he shall not have’.

Seeking what he shall not have?

With me here, what couldn't Moxi possibly seek?

That night, my acquaintances came to find me. Black Impermanence shuddered the moment he saw me. "Sansheng, I'm afraid you'll need to be more careful the next time you return to the underworld."

"Why?"

Black Impermanence shuddered again. "You didn't see the anger on the God of War's face. Knowing you had gone one step ahead, he looked as though Yanwang had stolen his woman away from him. Poor Yanwang is still wetting his pants right now."

"Was he very angry?"

Black Impermanence shuddered nonstop. I moved my gaze to White Impermanence who said to me: "Remember the Fengzhen granite tiles in Yangwang's palace? Crushed to powder in three steps."

I stopped in my tracks. I had forgotten that despite being much stronger than he was in his three lifetimes, I still had to return to the underworld and he'd also finish his trial in the end. By then, he'd be the God of War and I'd be the little Sansheng Stone again.

What's more, that Fengzhen granite was a hundred times harder than me...

I grabbed Black Impermanence's arm, eyes streaming in tears. "Brother Bai, when that day comes, you'll have to save me!"

White Impermanence stared at me for a moment, deadpanned and said, "It's embarrassing to wheedle, Sansheng."

I casually dabbed my tears. "It worked on Moxi."

Black Impermanence tugged White Impermanence away, saying: "I can't talk with you anymore. We have to go first. It's best if you fend for yourself. That's right, he is reborn into a farmer's home on the foothill of

Yangshan Mountain this time. If you wish to seduce him, then you had better leave soon.”

Did I need any reminders? That very night, I rushed to the foothill of Yangshan Mountain, perked my ears up and circled the mountain village round and round, waiting for the cries of a newborn.

Aside from a few households that stayed lit through the night, however, I didn’t hear any sound that would indicate childbirth from a home despite having waited until the stars nearly disappeared beyond the horizon.

I stood dejectedly on a farmer’s roof. The Black and White Guards of Impermanence had for certain escorted Moxi into reincarnation. The information they gave me couldn’t have been wrong. Where did Moxi reborn to, anyway?

At this moment, I suddenly noticed a man slipping out from a cottage with something in his arms.

The seal on my wrist burned. Worried, I quickly followed him. The man walked to the river outside the village and stopped there. He looked around for a while, then suddenly threw the bundle in his arms into the water. The swaddling cloth opened – a baby’s face caught my eyes.

I dashed out in outrage, stretched my hand and slapped the man senseless. Then I glided on the water surface and fished Moxi out.

After I found my footing, I took a look at the little livid face. His mouth opened and closed but did not emit any sound.

I froze.

Moxi... was mute in this life!

Muteness was believed to be ominous.

That was why his father threw him away when he didn't produce any sound after he was born. That was why... even if there were Sansheng, Moxi was destined to never find what he sought.

Given that Moxi had a disability in this lifetime, I first thought that it was best if we lived in isolation. This way, we could save ourselves from the trouble of earthly gossips. But then I thought that he should have a say in how to live own life. He still needed to cross his trial. If I blindly protected him, I'd cause him to fail his trial...

Heavenly law would not spare me.

I shook Moxi's tiny fists. While he still hadn't completely opened his palm, I stuffed a coin into his hand and said, "Moxi, if it's face, we're going to lie low in the city. If it's tail, we're going to lie low in the countryside. Give it a toss."

He flipped his hand and slapped the coin in my face. I scowled, not knowing whether I should cry or not.

I sincerely felt that Old Meng's soup hadn't taken its effect. Otherwise, how could he have had the heart to raise his hand at such a beautiful face like mine?

I glanced at the coin on the ground, saying, "You say so yourself. Lying low in the city it is." Moxi sucked on his fist, licking it without a care for anything else. Since he was busy drooling all over his chin, he had no extra time to spare me any of his attention.

The dashing God of War from Heaven had become so tragically ugly after reincarnation...

If I were to sketch his appearance right now and let him take a look at it later, I bet his face was going to be priceless.

Since Moxi had chosen to lie low in the city, I picked a big city to make sure I gave him exactly what he wanted. After much deliberation, I concluded that the capital was the most suitable. That very night, we rode on clouds and arrived in the capital the next day.

Considering that I was going to raise Moxi until he reached his adulthood, I couldn't let myself be the reason for him to spend his childhood moving around from place to place with no stable home. I gathered the forces of darkness inside of me to put away and decided that from here on out, I would not use magic again unless it was absolutely necessary.

I rented a cottage and furnished it. Afterwards, I watched Moxi as I very seriously thought about the lives we'd live without magic.

I poked his nose: "And what will you do for a living?"

Perhaps he felt that my tone was too disdainful of him, for he expressed dissatisfaction by drooling onto my hand. I quietly turned my hand and wiped the saliva back onto his hair.

He opened his mouth soundlessly, pushing me away with his tiny fists.

"Now is the only time I can pick on you. When you're back to being the God of War,

I've no idea how you're going to get back at me. I can't afford to suffer a loss." Like that, I wiped my saliva-stained hand onto him even harder.

I was still thinking about our livelihoods into the next day.

It wasn't difficult to make money from magic. The difficulty lay in how to divert the neighbors' suspicion from my making money by just sitting around at home all day.

I sat in the doorway cradling Moxi. In this exact moment of headache, a drunkard wobbly passed by our house. I stared at his back for a second before turning to ask Moxi: "How do you feel about alcohol?"

He was sucking on his finger, fast asleep.

Seven years later. There stood a tavern on the east side of the capital.

I knocked on the counter. Behind it, the shopkeeper who was settling accounts raised his eyes to look up. When he saw me, he smiled and said, “Miss Sansheng, why are you visiting the tavern today?”

“I couldn’t find Moxi at home. I thought he might have come here so I came to take a look.” I looked around but didn’t find Moxi. “How is business lately?” I asked.

“Business is very good recently. Would you like to check the books?” Accountant Liu was an honest, good-natured elderly man. I had always trusted him. Besides, this pub was just a front. When I really needed money, all I had to do was flip my hand and make a turn. I waved my hand telling him there was no need.

Upstairs, a small figure flashed by the corner of my eyes. I looked up to find that it

was Moxi. I smiled and waved to him: “Moxi! Time to go home for dinner.”

When he saw me, Moxi beamed and made a dash down the stairs.

Some of the guests who came to drink couldn’t help themselves from clucking curiously. Accountant Liu couldn’t help shaking his head. “You’re still young, miss. People are bound to misunderstand if you keep sticking by the young master’s side this way. Over time, I fear you will ruin your future prospects!”

I told everyone that Moxi was a child I had adopted – a little brother I was raising.

Toward this ‘noble’ action of mine, those who knew me always responded with a rueful look.

Moxi ran to my side. Hearing this, he looked quizzically at Accountant Liu and then turned around to look at me. I crouched down to wipe the dirt from Moxi’s face before replying with little concern: “Then let them misunderstand. It’s not as if I want anything from them. For me, all I need in this life is Moxi.”

Like a little grown-up, Moxi smiled and brushed aside the messy bangs on my forehead for me.

Accountant Liu sighed again. “Miss Sansheng, you’re still too young after all.”

I held Moxi’s hand as I said to Accountant Liu in all seriousness: “I’m not young. My skin just doesn’t wrinkle and my hair doesn’t gray, that’s all.” It was difficult enough for a rock to grow hair, let alone wrinkles and creases.

Accountant Liu continued to think I was just joking. Not wanting to explain anymore, I took a hold of Moxi’s hand and slowly made our way home.

While we were having dinner, Moxi suddenly and very anxiously gestured something to me. I watched for a time before I realized that he was asking me if I would be leaving with someone else.

Cool as a cucumber, I gave him a drumstick. “Do you want me to leave with someone else?”

Holding his bowl, he shook his head somewhat dolefully. After half a day of

gestures, he essentially told me that Xiao Ding’s older sister next-door had gone away with someone else and wouldn’t be coming back to see Xiao Ding anymore.

He was afraid I’d go away just like Xiao Ding’s sister.

I had never hid his origins from him, and in the past, he had never felt there to be anything amiss. But since the year before last, after starting school, he was beginning to realize that there was something different between himself and the others. Perhaps people had said something to make him afraid that even I did not want him anymore. He did everything by himself and became so well-behaved that he wasn’t nearly as troublesome as other children.

His mindfulness broke my heart.

Had I known this, I would've taken him to the mountains where he could live more freely and I could be a more comfortable guardian.

I patted his head, warmly saying: "Sansheng won't go anywhere. Wherever you are is wherever I'll be." I came here to seduce him, so how could I ever have the heart to leave?

His eyes gleamed upon hearing this. He let me play with his soft hair as he finished his plate.

In the evening, I had just sent Moxi to bed when I heard a small sound in the yard.

I furrowed my brow in thought, wondering which idiot had picked my yard to steal from. I was slightly startled when I opened the door. It wasn't a burglar but a large man in night-traveling clothes. At this moment, he was clutching the wound at his waist and leaning against the wall as he hid himself in the shadows of the night.

He had no idea that I could still see everything even if I were blindfolded.

Pursing my lips, I pretended not to have seen him and went to the far corner of the yard to bring a bucket of water back to the house.

The capital was placed under curfew that night. Outside, the entire sky was lit by bright torches. I hugged Moxi and fell to a peaceful sleep. But before I fell asleep, I faintly wondered if perhaps Moxi's tribulation had begun or if this was merely a coincidence. Whatever it may be, it was going to be a pain in the neck. If I still found him here tomorrow...

I'd have to knock him out and throw him into the street.

12: Blame it on fate...

He was still there the next day.

Nonetheless, I couldn't toss him out according to last night's plan... because...

Moxi was tugging the sleeve of the unconscious black-clothed man and innocently looking up at me, anxiously hoping I would come over and help him.

I sighed. Would I be a little too cruel if I were to throw this man out right now? The thing I couldn't bear the most was having Moxi looking at me with those eyes. I quickly nodded, dragged the man inside the house, stripped him of his clothes, and cleansed the wound at his waist before dressing it with some medicine.

His breathing slowly evened and some color was finally restored on Moxi's little face. If he had been the God of War Moxi, then I was certain he wouldn't even give this injury a glance. But this was only a seven-year-old Moxi who was still so young and innocent.

After I washed my hands, I looked at Moxi and told him quite seriously: "Saving him might bring us a lot of trouble. But since you asked me to save him, don't go telling me you regret it in the future."

Moxi nodded albeit with some perplexity.

Watching his big watery eyes blinking up at me, fright not yet gone from his face, my heart softened into a puddle. Unable to help myself, I smacked my lips onto his soft white cheek.

His eyes grew even rounder.

"Does it feel good?" I lifted his chin and asked him like a rogue.

Moxi touched his face and gave my question some serious thought, then solemnly nodded.

I grinned smugly. "Even if it does, this is something you can only do to the most important person in your life. You mustn't do it casually."

Moxi softly rubbed his cheek, and then cupped his small hands around my face. My reflection was clearly imprinted in his clear eyes at the moment he stood on tiptoe, copied my action, and gave my cheek a sounding peck.

Afterwards, he touched the spot he had just kissed and kept looking at me as if to say: "I'll only do this to Sansheng."

For a second, I couldn't help giving him several more kisses. I kissed him till his face was smeared in saliva. He was hesitant to push me away in his helpless way, only smiling quietly.

"Tell me, Moxi. How am I not supposed to like you?!" I ruffled the soft hair on his forehead, wishing I could carry him in my pocket and keep him safe from the world.

Our lives went on as usual. We just happened to now have a comatose man in the house. The number of soldiers marching to and fro in the capital increased markedly. The tavern had been searched many times, but they had fortunately not come to search the house just yet.

Three days later, I picked up a book to read in my free time after Moxi went to school. I sat on a rocking chair in the courtyard looking to the sky then looking back at my book. I rocked back and forth counting the days till plum blossoms would fill the garden. Out of the blue, illusory footsteps sounded inside the house. I closed my eyes and listened as they slowly made their way out of the room, circled the living room and then the woodshed, and finally to the yard before they halted.

"Miss, who are you?" he asked in a chilly voice. "Why did you save me?"

"Blame it on fate..." And then, I couldn't help but lament: "I have a soft spot that made me save you. What else could I do?"

The man behind me fell silent for a short while. His voice carried a hint of awkwardness: "I thank you for your kind feelings, but I'm currently not interested in a relationship."

He made me want to laugh. I was referring to Moxi as the one I had a soft spot for, but this man tried to be smart and thought himself a ladies' man. He had obviously and thoroughly misunderstood. I wasn't one to explain things, and since this wasn't anything important, I just let him think what he wanted.

Not hearing me speak again, he asked, "For the past few days, was it you who... erm, dressed my wound for me?"

"Yes," I said without much concern. "Pooping, peeing, farting, shampooing, sponging, wiping your butt, it was I who served you through it all." After Moxi went to sleep, I used magic for everything.

I gave some thought and then added: "I'm telling you this for your own good. Your excrement has a heavy odor. Get treatment, you're sick."

Not one peep behind me.

This silence persisted until the sun went down.

Moxi came back and froze when he opened the door. He ran to me, pulled my hand and pointed to the man. His smile showed that he was pleasantly surprised. At this time, I was carrying a dish of stir-fry vegetables. I nodded as I walked into the house:

"Yes, yes, I know, I know."

The man looked at Moxi, his expression strange for a moment. "He is..."

I gave him a glance. "My little brother."

Moxi smiled at him. He seemed to have thought of something, for he made a bow to him like a little grown-up. Appearing to have taken interest in Moxi, the man stepped up and circled him a few times, saying: "He has an excellent body for learning martial arts. But, can he not speak?"

“Yes, he was born that way.” He asked very cautiously; on the other hand, I answered very carelessly. Moxi also smiled unconcernedly, attracting his curious glances again and again.

“You’re very open-minded.”

By the time food was laid on the table, like always, I gave some to Moxi while he gestured to me about the interesting things at school. The man couldn’t restrain himself from asking: “He still doesn’t know how to write?”

Moxi’s smile dropped from his face as he lowered his head to eat his food. I placed my chopsticks down. “You got something to say about it?”

“I...”

“I don’t care even if you do.”

He was silent, and then softly sighed: “Miss, you’ve misunderstood me. I only meant that perhaps the teachers are prejudiced when they see him this way and do not teach him properly. You’ve saved me, but I have nothing to give in return.

The only thing I can do is teach him some practical things so that he can provide for himself in the future.”

“You should ask Moxi these things. What are you looking at me for?” In my opinion, Moxi had always been my equal. He should decide his own matters. How could I decide for him?

The other person gave another sigh, likely thinking it was nigh impossible to talk to me. As he was about to speak again, Moxi suddenly grabbed his hand, gave him a solemn stare, and nodded vigorously. He froze before laughing: “Then I’m your teacher from now on. There’s no need go to school tomorrow. It will be very difficult to learn from me; you’ll need to be prepared.”

Moxi kept on nodding. I lightly asked, “What’s your name? I can’t always holler ‘hey you’.”

He thought for a moment and then offered: “I go by the name of Bai Jiu[8].”

Pfft, what an uncreative pseudonym. “That’s great, I’m called Huang Jiu. This kid here is called Xiong Huang Jiu[9].”

Bai Jiu’s face twitched. “Miss, you have a great sense of humor...”

I lightly replied: “Not at all.”

Thenceforward, Moxi began his apprenticeship.

Not only for Moxi but even for me, ‘master’ was a completely foreign creature.

Master Bai Jiu taught Moxi words, art, martial arts, and even an elegant melody or two occasionally.

He taught a lot and Moxi also learned quickly, as if after depriving him of his ability to speak, Heaven had compensated him with other talents.

He was most gifted in music. It didn’t take long before he was able to strum a song.

I loved lying beside his zither stand, propping my head to watch his miniature adult appearance. His young and tender fingertips would glide across the strings. There were a few notes he hadn’t mastered accurately, but he was so darling in his confidence that one couldn’t help adoring him.

I often took advantage of Bai Jiu’s absence to quietly have my ways with Moxi.

One time, I gave Moxi a hug and a kiss.

He flushed from my kiss and was caught by his master. From that day on, just like his master, he became cautious around me as if I were some children-eating witch from the Black Mountain.

9 yellow wine and realgar wine respectively

It became difficult for me to have my ways with Moxi. I resented Bai Jiu so much my blood could've dyed several beaches. Just as I was wondering when to chop this deadwood up and toss him back to the woods, he suddenly became busy and often disappeared for a long time.

I relaxed in jubilation. Rain or shine, I came and stuck by Moxi's side. I didn't know what Bai Jiu had said to Moxi, but his affection for me had turned timid and shy.

I didn't want to force Moxi, but my grudges against Bai Jiu grew even deeper.

Moxi took his studies very seriously. Even if Bai Jiu weren't pushing him, he would exceed the daily tasks Bai Jiu gave him. He was still so young, nonetheless. Over time, he wouldn't be able to keep this up.

I sewed a new coat for him on the first snow of the year. He held and admired it over and over, both hesitant to put it on but also reluctant to put it down. Blushing, he watched me with apprehension. At the thought of his bashfulness previously, I silently forbore the impulse to kiss him. "Tidy things up yourself. I'm going to make dinner."

By the time I brought food back, Moxi was hugging the coat, asleep on the table.

I carried him to bed, tucked him in, and then painfully watched the small face that had grown so thin. With my power, it wasn't impossible to protect and help him through his trial so that he may have a safe life. But it was after all his life. He should be the one deciding it. I touched his face, thinking: After this life is over, will we cross paths again? The Black and White Guards of Impermanence said you made a good tantrum in the underworld... What's wrong with you? I helped you pass your trial, but instead of thanking me, you're always mean to me. You're being ungrateful! I was nice for nothing!

And yet, no matter how poorly Moxi treated me, I couldn't treat him the same way.

Who told him to be my love trial?!

I softly sighed. Watching him fast asleep, I couldn't but get sleepy myself. Not caring about the food that was slowly growing cold on the table, I lay bedside, admired his face, and slowly dozed off.

It was a ticklish feeling on my cheek that woke me up.

I opened my eyes to see that Moxi was watching me with a huge grin on his face.

He was holding my hair in his hand, sweeping it across my cheek and tickling me again.

I didn't like having other people touch my precious hair, but it never mattered with

Moxi. Even if it did, I could never get mad at that beaming face. I blinked a few times and said to him: "Moxi, are you having your ways with me?"

He copied my blinking and looked at me in puzzlement, not understanding what 'having his way' meant. I gave him a sly smile and playfully nibbled his ear. "This is called 'having your ways'."

He froze, clutched his ear, and turned crimson red.

As I was sighing why this child was so easily embarrassed in this lifetime, he surprisingly puckered up and gave my cheek a sounding peck.

This time, it was my turn to freeze.

He grasped my hand and wrote onto my palm with his index finger: "I love Sansheng the most."

All I knew was that my heart was melting into a pool of bubbly warm liquid that was rippling all the way to my limbs.

By the time I recovered, I planted an equally blunt kiss onto his face. I kicked away my shoes, lifted the quilt and climbed into bed, cuddling

him in my arms. “Let’s not do anything today. We’ll just lie here and have a good rest.”

But how could there be such a good thing? Not long after we lay down, the quilt was snatched away.

Blue veins popped on Bai Jiu’s forehead. He looked at Moxi, then glared at me, and at last closed his eyes to restrain himself before asking in a stabilized voice: “Why aren’t you doing your homework today?”

Moxi instantly jumped away from my hug to hurry out of bed and put on his shoes.

Furious that we got bothered at such an intimate moment, I grasped Moxi’s hand while looking at Bai Jiu saying: “What are you running for? We aren’t adulterers caught in bed.”

Moxi obviously didn’t know what I meant, but Bai Jiu was livid with anger. He pointed at me: “You, you, you...” He stood rigid for half a day and couldn’t manage anything more to say. He reached for Moxi, wanting to pull him away from me. I imperturbably held onto Moxi, blocking him with one hand.

His expression worsened when he failed to grab Moxi.

I smiled smugly. “Hmph! Moxi is mine!”

“How can you subject such atrocity on a child?”

I didn’t bother with him. I turned around and petted Moxi’s head, asking: “Must you follow and learn from such a useless fog?” In point of fact, Bai Jiu should only be in his twenties or thirties; he was a far cry from a ‘useless fog’. But in my eyes at this moment, his ideas were so old-fashioned that he was no different from the useless fogies at school.

As soon as I said this, Bai Jiu’s face turned the color of pork liver. He looked as though he could spray dog blood in my face and then give me a good beating.

Moxi hastily covered my mouth in disapproval. I pulled his hand away and asked him, “You still want to learn from him?”

Moxi looked at Bai Jiu and nodded. I caught a glimpse of Bai Jiu as he smiled a strange smile like that of a child who had just cheated while at the same time like that of a beaming villain.

For the time being, I could not tell what I was feeling. I only lightly said, “Very well.

Continue learning from him, then.” Without even putting on my shoes, I went straight out the door to the tavern and spent the night there.

This was the first time I stayed out overnight. It was also the first time I got mad at Moxi, or rather it was jealousy I was feeling. He was clearly just a stranger I had saved. He hadn’t even been with us for long but the stupid child was already taking his side! For crying out loud...

Dammit!

That night at the pub, I sent Accountant Liu along with everyone else home. Then, I poured all the white liquor in the store down the toilet.

8 homonymic with ‘white wine’

13: Don’t be afraid, Moxi

No sooner had I awoken the next day than Accountant Liu came to see me. He pulled me to a pile of empty jars and looked as though he wanted to cry but simply couldn’t.

I heaved a sigh while slapping on a helpless look: “White wine isn’t very popular among the customers anyway. Let’s sell yellow wine.”

Seeing that even the owner herself didn't really care, Accountant Liu naturally had nothing more to say.

I was still upset enough not to go home, and remained the entire day at the tavern.

And when I didn't see anyone coming to look for me, I got even more peeved. The stubbornness of a rock kept me at the tavern for another night.

On the third day, I loitered outside the pub for an entire morning with a sour face on and ended up scaring all our customers away. Half pulling and half dragging, Accountant Liu begged me to go back inside. I found a corner to drink. At times I felt angry, and then at times I felt sad. After consuming some alcohol, the idea that perhaps something had happened to Moxi began to nip at me. I could hardly stand still because of this fear. I got up and was about to go home when, without any warning, a small figure flew into my arms and clung onto my waist.

I looked down. Moxi?! Hugging me, his face was firmly pressed against my stomach.

He was out of breath, and after a while, still didn't calm down.

"Moxi."

He ignored my call. I had to call a few more times before he would nod his head against my stomach to show that he heard me. "What's wrong?"

He only now looked up from my arms with reddened eyes. He signed to tell me that he thought I had left and hadn't wanted him anymore.

I frowned, unable to help myself from grumbling: "You're the one who doesn't want me!"

His eyes reddened again as though he was going to cry when I said this to him. He hastily gestured something to the effect that yesterday, Bai Jiu took him to the outskirts to practice martial arts and he also didn't

return for the day. This morning, they got back only to find me gone. He thus quickly came over here to look for me.

He asked me not to chide him or to get angry with him. "Since Sansheng doesn't like Master, Moxi won't learn from him anymore," he wrote onto my palm after some deliberation.

When I saw him like this, my anger, no matter how bad, also vanished.

I couldn't but sigh. I crouched down, ruffled his hair and asked, "Why do you like Bai Jiu so much? Is he prettier than Sansheng?"

He resolutely shook his head. Pleased, I smiled. "Then how about we find another master for you?"

He kept still for a moment before writing on my palm: "Moxi wants to learn martial arts."

My brows raised in surprised. I didn't expect Moxi to have such thoughts. As I was about to ask him why, I suddenly heard a crass male voice shouting in front of the store: "No white wine? You run a tavern but you're actually telling me you have no wine? I don't give a damn. I have to drink today!"

Accountant Liu profusely apologized to him.

I scowled and told Moxi: "Stay here. We'll go back together after I take care of this."

Moxi nervously tried to pull me back. I patted his head to reassure him and then walked out. I frowned upon seeing the person in question. The third young master of the Guan family that ran the capital rampant had actually picked my tavern to crash today. The world is full of wonders, indeed. The third young master's father was a first-rank official in court, his older sister was the Imperial Consort, and his entire family was favored by the emperor. Normally, anyone who came across them would need to show some minimal courtesy. This third young master was a notoriously rotten dregs. He never worked, and was always found

at various entertainment establishments. He loved women, money, and alcohol – a classic player exemplar.

It surprised me beyond words that such an infamous man was suddenly making an appearance at my little-known tavern.

Accountant Liu was still apologizing to him. I stopped Accountant Liu and said to the third young master: “Our store doesn’t have white wine today. If you must have some, sir, I believe there are several large restaurants at the main intersection ahead.”

The third master looked me up and down with his squinted eyes – eyes so vulgar I just wanted to gouge them out. He rubbed his chin, smiled and said, “Just now on the street, I heard that the owner of this tavern is a widow with a kid, but that she wasn’t old in the least, and even rather pretty. I didn’t believe them... but it turns out the rumor wasn’t wrong. You are quite a fetching woman.”

I lightly replied: “I guess half of that is true.”

He didn’t get mad or angry. For a second there, he forgot how to reply. By the time he recovered, the smile on his face grew even more leering. He went up to me and grabbed my hand. “Haha! They forgot to tell me that this sweet lady was also a lonely little slut! Why don’t you let me give you some love and care today?”

I eyed him more deliberately, wondering whether to cut his tongue off first or to claw his eyes out first, or to simply neuter him and hang his winkle above the city gate tower as a favor to every woman in the world and as a warning to everyone else.

Out of the blue, a tiny figure dashed over and fiercely pushed him to the ground.

While I was still stupefied, a jug had hit the third young master and bathed him in yellow wine.

Silence all around.

Moxi's anger appeared to not have cooled down. He went behind the counter, looked for a piece of paper and wrote a huge 'SCRAM' on it, then threw it at the man.

Apart from the time he threw a fireball at me in the underworld, I had never seen him this furious. Maybe he had also been this furious, but he was a mature adult who knew how to control himself. As a child presently, his temper just broke loose.

I saw the onlookers quickly dispersing out of the corner of my eye. Accountant Liu looked as though an apocalypse had arrived. The helpers in the pub also turned ashen. Everyone knew what sort of retaliation was in store for us.

But I was not scared even if they were.

I was about to praise Moxi when, at the same time, he pulled me down and hugged me tight. He patted me on the back as if to give me comfort, as if to say: "It's okay, Sangsheng, don't be afraid. Moxi will protect you."

I was so touched despite not knowing whether I should laugh or cry at his action.

While I was squeezing him in my hug, I suddenly saw the third young master climbing up, then slamming a piece of broken shard onto Moxi's head.

My mind went blank that instant. All I could think was that nobody must ever hurt my Moxi. I immediately pressed Moxi's head into my chest, myself leaning forward.

A sharp sting pricked my head. Even though I was the spirit of a stone, the fierce blow blackened my sight and made me dizzy for a moment.

Moxi was petrified in my arms. He outstretched his hand to gingerly touch the warm and sticky blood that was slowly trickling down my forehead. Shock and fear gradually filled his eyes.

"Don't be afraid, Moxi."

His face was blanched.

The third young master complained of a headache and then menaced to have our heads chopped off as compensation.

Incensed, my desire to kill rose from within.

I had never been treated this way in the past one thousand years. This third young master of the Guans was really the first. At this point, I seriously wanted to snip his little wiener off, stir-fry it, feed it to him, and see whether he could grow another one. Compensation? Like hell that'd happen!

Yanwang wouldn't let me kill in the human world, but there are plenty of ways to make people suffer living deaths.

Wrath condensed in my eyes as I drew the forces of darkness to my fingertips. If he took another step, I shall directly maim his family jewels.

Just then, a figure suddenly yanked the third young master's arm away and forced him into an awkward fall onto the ground. That person seemed to not have cooled down, for he stepped over and gave him a hard kick. "Why are there such scum in broad daylight?!"

This voice sounded very familiar. I wiped my blood away to take a closer look at him.

Bai Jiu.

I pursed my lips, then turned around to look at Moxi only to find him in joy. Jealousy crept up inside of me. I covered my head and pretended to weakly fall against Moxi, feebly saying: "Moxi, it hurts so much..."

Moxi panicked and wrapped his arms around me. His round eyes reddened, but he did not dare to cry.

I leaned against Moxi while giving Bai Jiu a provocative glance. But how could he find the mood to be vindictive with me right now?

That third young master was a real useless piece of thrash. He actually passed out from a single kick! Arguing with this bully was one thing, being immature with him was one thing, fighting with him was one thing, but knocking him out cold was an entirely other issue.

Bai Jiu's eyes swept to the far distance before he said to Accountant Liu: "We're closing shop today!" Then he came over and asked me: "Can you still walk?"

Now that the third young master got beaten this badly, his father would never let it go. Offending a big official wasn't a good thing for Moxi in this lifetime. The only way left was to quickly make our escape before soldiers could come to find us. We ought to flee the capital, change our identities, and then think of what to do next.

I dropped my weakling act and wiped the blood on my head. "Just some scratches. Nothing to worry about."

Bai Jiu arched an eyebrow and said nothing.

After returning home, I had wanted to quickly pack and escape before all, but Moxi insisted on helping me bandage my wounds first, refusing to go anywhere.

In this lifetime, I had never used magic in front of Moxi. At this point, I naturally did not dare to expose myself. The only thing I could do was wait for Moxi to slowly clean and dress my wound with shaking hands.

I thought that no matter how scary the third young master was, he was just a rich kid. I didn't expect soldiers to come until the next day at the earliest.

Unexpectedly, soldiers came that very night to search.

They gathered outside the yard, reluctant to come in. From the sound of their heavy footsteps, I knew that this was no ordinary infantry. If they were here only to capture a woman and a small child who had injured the third son of the Guans, then they were making too big of a fuss. I

turned and looked to Bai Jiu who was standing in the yard. His back was turned against me, his figure solitary.

Thus when I heard these shouts from outside the yard: “Rebel Bai Qi! Resistance is futile!” I was not surprised in the least. When I saved him, I already knew this man wasn’t simple. I just didn’t think he’d be this problematic.

Bai Qi was the treasonous general. It was said that when he became dissatisfied with the emperor’s appointment of corrupt officials, implementation of severe policies, and surrender to barbarians of the east, he turned against the court and intended to overthrow the government to become the emperor himself.

Such was the character we ran into. No wonder the capital was placed under curfew for so many days; no wonder soldiers came to us so soon.

Moxi grabbed onto my sleeves, shaking badly. I patted his head and warmly said, “It’s okay! Sansheng’s right here.”

But he shook his head, writing onto my palm: “Moxi will protect Sansheng.” His eyes shone bright in the dark.

Putting aside my and Bai Jiu’s conflict, this master of his had actually done his due diligence. What Moxi learned in a month with him was probably more than what he learned at school in three years.

If Bai Jiu were to continue teaching him, with Moxi’s studious and diligent disposition, there was no limit to what Moxi could achieve in his future.

The thought of saving Bai Jiu flashed in my mind, but then I wondered: if I revealed magic in front of Moxi at this time, how would he be looking at me? And how would Bai Jiu be looking at me?

Not giving me much time to ponder, Bai Jiu had strode out.

He opened the courtyard’s gate. Outside, the armed soldiers were all clad in black armors, stinging my eyes with the fire light reflecting off of

their blades. In addition to the fire glaring against our faces, there was also an overwhelming energy in the air that made me ill at ease.

I looked to the distance past the gate where a bright yellow palanquin sat behind layers of encircling soldiers.

My brows raised in astonishment. I didn't expect the famous tyrannical king to place enough importance on Bai Qi to personally come and capture the fugitive. I unconsciously let out a sigh. This time, I feared I couldn't help him even if I wanted to.

Spirits of the underworld were born with a natural fear for rulers' inherent royal energy. Even the royal energy emitting from an imbecile emperor was enough to suppress little underworld beings from lifting their heads. Even though I wasn't suffering so bad that I could not lift my head, the strength in my body had mostly been subdued.

"Rebel Bai Qi! You've betrayed His Majesty by surrendering to the enemy and killing our own people! Now you even dare to assassinate His Majesty! Your crimes are unpardonable..." the eunuch condemned his crimes in a pitchy voice.

Bai Qi icily growled: "What a load of bull! If you want to arrest me, then come on over."

Hearing this, a tremor ran through Moxi as he wanted to step out. I quietly stopped him with a shake of my head.

I, Sansheng, had always been a selfish creature. I drew the lines of friendships very clearly. The friendship with Bai Jiu wasn't enough for me to sacrifice Moxi and myself in order to save him. For Moxi, offending the emperor had no benefits in this lifetime.

The eunuch grunted: "Go! Why haven't you arrested the criminal?!" Soldiers instantly rushed forth.

Bai Jiu's expression frosted up into a sneer as he directly twisted a soldier's arm, seized his spear, flipped his hand and thrust the weapon

into another soldier's chest. "Arrest me with your ability?" he said with a laugh.

I guess it wasn't an urban legend when they said the great general was brave and fierce, and had matchless martial arts.

The eunuch's face couldn't help but crumble. He looked toward the bright yellow palanquin where two gentle claps sounded.

I knitted my brow, sensing the murderous intent in the yard suddenly thickening.

By the time I looked up, the walls had been lined with archers, their bows raised and strings drawn. Ordinarily, I'd have already shot them down one by one before they could even climb the wall. But the emperor's presence had seriously impeded my senses today.

I took Moxi into my arms while secretly pooling dark forces into my palm.

Bai Jiu narrowed his eyes, glancing across the soldiers that were surrounding the small courtyard. He raised his voice and spoke to the palanquin: "This doesn't concern them. I'll come with you, let them go."

The eunuch placed his ears next to the palanquin and quietly listened for a moment. He next waved his hand. The surrounding archers immediately lowered their bows.

As soon as Bai Jiu flung the spear in his hand away, the soldiers cuffed him with iron chains. I gazed after his back and sighed. Bai Jiu, Bai Jiu, you're a great general, aren't you? Humans are treacherous, how can you trust others like this?

Even if it were the emperor.

Not waiting for Bai Jiu to go far, the eunuch shrilly shouted: "Kill them!"

Bai Jiu, who was escorted by five or six soldiers, turned around in dismay and thundered: "Tyrant..." His voice had hardly landed by the

time archers already let fly their arrows on command. Numerous sharp arrows pierced the air and flew at us. I hugged Moxi standing in the yard with nowhere to hide.

Die, or reveal my spiritual powers?

I chuckled. Did I even have to choose? Moxi was still here. If he hadn't passed his tribulation, I'd never let him come into any harm.

I had long transferred dark forces from my palm to my abdomen. I closed my eyes to concentrate before giving off a scream. Dark forces shot out and deflected all the arrows backwards.

Instantly, a constant stream of terror rang into my ears. Many soldiers had been wounded by the backfiring arrows. They one by one fell off the wall. Even the ones who weren't injured were scared stiff, all looking at me, aghast.

Silence, silence, and more silence.

With all eyes were on me, I gave a bashful sigh: "I'm sorry for being so beautiful."

"Demon!" Someone suddenly cried just as commotion took over the grounds.

I held Moxi's cold hands as I gave his paled face a smile. I called to him like I usually called him home for dinner: "It's okay Moxi, Sansheng's right here."

The blank look in his eyes stung my heart. At the thought of the last two lifetimes ending bleakly, I couldn't help telling him: "Don't listen to their rubbish. Sansheng's not a demon."

But what time did I have to delay? I used what strength was left in my abdomen to leap to Bai Jiu's side. While the crowd hadn't yet reacted, I knocked the few burly soldiers guarding Bai Jiu unconscious, grabbed Bai Jiu's arm, and then flew back beside Moxi.

Not looking at their shocked eyes, I lifted a finger and let the iron chains on his wrists break apart. I pushed Bai Jiu away while telling him: "Take Moxi with you. I'll block them from behind."

No matter how strong Bai Jiu was, he was still only a mortal. There were so many soldiers here, not to mention archers. Wanting him to block them was firstly not very safe, and secondly not very nice.

I had always been confident of my own ability. Even with only a fraction of my spiritual powers left, I still had full confidence. After all, everyone present was a mortal; the most they could do was give me some scratches. With that thought, I urged Bai Jiu to take Moxi away. I couldn't flex my muscles with the two of them here.

Having witnessed the power of my scream, Bai Jiu did not bother asking me further.

"Take care," he simply said before he took off with Moxi.

Moxi struggled from his arms to grab onto my sleeve, showing that he was unwilling to let go and would rather die with me.

I was getting a headache. The troops on the emperor's side suddenly reacted.

"Capture the demoness and the traitor!" the eunuch shouted. "The bounty will be handsome!" But because the soldiers remembered how powerful I had been, they stalled for a long time without daring to advance. I took this opportunity to ruffle Moxi's soft hair. "Moxi, don't be afraid. Sansheng is very powerful. You two go on ahead and I'll catch up to you soon."

He stubbornly held on; panic and fear filled his eyes.

The soldiers on the other side were set to charge. Having no other choice, I steeled my heart and pried off each of his fingers from my sleeve.

Disbelief took over his eyes.

I could not bear to look. I brushed his hands off, turned my back and took two steps to the front, coldly saying, “Go!”

Moxi could not speak, and therefore I didn’t get to know how he left in the end. The tears he left on the back of my hand burned a hole in my heart. It’ll be all right,

I thought, it’s not forever goodbye. Moxi and I will meet soon again.

The soldiers panicked to see Bai Jiu flee. A few bold ones rushed forward, wanting to jump over me to chase after Bai Jiu.

I smiled at them. “Hold it right there.”

At the same time I gave this gentle warning, I gathered dark forces to my fingertips and waved my arm. A long yet thin, deep yet narrow flash traced across the small yard and divided several other small courtyards nearby in two.

The soldiers were on one side; I was on the other.

I burst out laughing. My laughter carried the deadly energy I had cemented for a millennium from the Wangchuan River. “Whoever crosses this line is going to get his winkie cut off.”

14: So it’s you

I had thought it would be easy to make an escape by myself. All I needed was an invisible spell and I’d be able to catch up to Moxi in no time.

But life never turned out the way I thought it would.

Never did I imagine the emperor would take action himself, less still did I expect this blind ruler to be so malicious.

He gave me a powerful blow and followed it with an iron net. It was no surprise I got captured.

Before being dragged into prison, I told myself that as soon as the emperor left, as soon as my spiritual power recovered, I'd make my escape.

After they dragged me into prison, however, I could only heave a weak sigh. The emperor must have seen Bai Jiu as a very serious threat, or they wouldn't have locked me up in the palace dungeon.

The emperor firstly wanted to prevent me from escaping. He secondly wanted to extract Bai Jiu and Moxi's whereabouts from me more conveniently. What they didn't know was that this had coincidentally subdued my spiritual powers to their lowest.

Since I couldn't run away, I adopted an attitude of living in peace in this dark dungeon.

The mortals' torture instruments weren't particularly dangerous to me. The daily whipping they gave wasn't any different from getting my itch scratched on a scheduled basis.

Though I have to say: I was scratched very wrongfully each day.

They asked me for Moxi's whereabouts day after day. How was I supposed to know? I honestly told them just as much but they kept insisting that I wasn't being honest. I made a mental note to ask the imps as soon as these people arrived in the underworld whether they had any brains or not. If the answer was yes, I'd beat them to a pulp. If the answer was no, I'd simply chop their heads off and push them down the animal reincarnation well.

Since they didn't believe me, I stopped bothering to answer. Over time, they only came to whip me once or twice out of routine. Then much much later, they stopped coming to whip me or give me food altogether. I was kept in captivity, living my days not knowing morning from night. They wanted to starve me to death, but little did they know, I was the

spirit of a stone. As long as I could draw energy from the earth, I'd be able to live for centuries without any foods or drinks.

My only concern was that I didn't know what day it was. I didn't know how Moxi was doing outside.

This prison seemed to be very well hidden. I'd been here for a long time but I had not seen anyone else being brought in. Had I been an ordinary person, I would've rotted in here and nobody would know.

Fortunately, I did not fear darkness, for this environment perfectly allowed me to concentrate on my cultivation.

During this lengthy time, my spiritual powers made a slight improvement – not enough to aid me in my escape, nevertheless.

I didn't know how long it had been by the time I finally heard another voice in addition to the squeaking rats. Everything sounded so much clearer in the dark.

The door opened and in came a single person.

I sat there dumbly. Did they not come to check on the prisoners?

He passed the fire and rounded the corner, slowly walking over this way. I squinted and gazed up at the person who came – a young lad in his twenties or thirties, dressed in a robe as pristine as snow and looking entirely out of place in this dungeon. His face was inexplicably familiar under the fire's glow.

When he saw me, a slight change came over his serene face.

I just knew it! I had no idea how long I had been here, but I generally knew it had to have been ten years at least. Who wouldn't be scared witless to see someone who hadn't had any foods or drinks still living and breathing after ten years inside a dungeon? Not to mention my ghastly appearance, it was already a commendable courage he did not throw the torch and run for the hills.

“Sansheng,” he called my name. “It’s Chang’an.”

I frowned in thought; the name was a bit fuzzy in my distant memory. Quite a while later, I reacted: “Ah, the chicken little priest of Liubo.” Because I hadn’t spoken for too long, my voice came out croaking.

He furrowed his brow: “I’ll help you leave.”

I cleared my throat, smilingly saying: “You seem to be doing well. Why aren’t you afraid I would pick you like when you were younger?”

He smiled back awkwardly: “It’s been thirty years. You still remember pretty well, Sansheng.”

Thirty years. I froze.

In our last lifetime, I had gone to the underworld after Zhonghua killed me and waited two years for him there, after which I had returned to Earth to look for Moxi.

We had lived together for eight years, which makes it a total of ten years. Yet Chang’an was now saying it had been thirty years.

It turned out I’d stayed in this place for two decades.

Two decades... Moxi must be twenty-eight by now. I wondered how he looked.

Leaving the palace was much easier than I thought.

Chang’an found me a servant outfit. After I put it on, he openly took me out of the palace. Along the way, I kept seeing people prostrating to him, saying: “Your Eminence, Imperial Reverend.”

Imperial Reverend? “Hasn’t Liubo always looked down on these kinds of things?” I asked him after we left the palace and while basking under the sunlight I hadn’t seen in a long time as I recited a purification rune to restore myself to my former appearance.

He looked back at me. "It's a long story. I need to take you to someone. Let's talk about these things along the way."

Chang'an told me that Liubo continuously declined after it was met with its calamity and never did return to its glorious past. Its disciples had to take off their fairy loftiness to reenter the vulgar world. Knowing I had saved his life but had ended up getting killed by Zhonghua, he had always felt guilty toward me and had been searching for my reincarnation to repay this debt.

"Sansheng, why do you still have memories from your past life?" he asked.

I didn't know how to explain to him about all the karma that was involved. I pondered for a moment and replied: "Perhaps it's because I couldn't let go of your Most Reverend."

He nodded and didn't try to pursue that thread anymore. "Twenty years ago, there was a rumor that there was a demoness in the capital who got captured by the emperor himself. I hadn't thought of you, but ten years ago a man came to look for me and asked me to rescue someone from the palace. That was when I found out you had been caught. Knowing it was you, I naturally agreed. In the name of the Imperial Reverend, I thus entered the palace and probed for your whereabouts all these years. It took this long but I finally got you out."

"Is the person who asked you to save me named Moxi?"

"Yes, and no." He softly smiled: "Do you know what kind of person this Moxi you speak of had become?"

I shook my head. He lowered his voice: "Although the capital is still safe at this time, on the battlefield ahead, the imperial army is defeated again and again. In no more than three months, this country will have a new master." I dithered to hear him say: "The one who exterminates the enemy on the battlefield, the one who wipes out hundreds of thousands of the Empire's soldiers, the one who brings back military exploits for the rebels is no other than Moxi."

“But the one who asked me to save you...” as he spoke, he took me into a small courtyard in a deep alley. When the gate opened, I saw a man sitting inside.

I arched my brow. “Oh, so it’s you.”

Bai Jiu. Twenty years was a long stretch of time for human beings. He was still standing there straight and tall, but his hair had grayed and his face had wrinkled.

He was greatly surprised upon seeing me. “You... haven’t changed at all.”

I unconsciously frowned. “I’m not a demon.”

He smirked ironically: “What importance is there whether you are a demon or not?

Demons eat people, people also eat people. They are all the same.” He paused before continuing: “I find myself more and more nostalgic the older I get. Now that I’ve finally rescued you, I don’t feel so haunted by old regrets anymore.”

I was so sick of listening to these humans lamenting to me about their old age. I cut him short and asked, “Where’s Moxi?”

“He should now be in Rongshan,” he told me. “That boy misses you dearly, be it day or night,” he added helplessly, his words carrying a sigh of frustration.

I glanced at Bai Jiu quizzically. The jealousy that had long been buried deep inside of me inexplicably rose again. “I like Moxi and he likes me. If I’m not there, isn’t it natural that he should miss me? Are you saying he should miss you in some kind of taboo romance?”

Standing nearby, Chang’an couldn’t help but shake with laughter.

Bai Jiu didn’t get angry. He looked at me, dumbfounded. “Why hasn’t your temper changed at all after all these years of imprisonment?”

I ignored the both of them. “I saved you, you saved me. We’re now even. Let’s part ways here. I need to go find Moxi.” I was about to go when I suddenly remembered that Moxi had honored him as his master. My brain took a turn and I came to have a general grasp of what was going on. “It’s fine that you asked Moxi to help you fight your battles and win the kingdom for you. But after that, please let Moxi go. I do not want to have to see betrayal and perfidy happening to Moxi. The boy is good-hearted, he will be sad.”

Bai Jiu made no answer. Chang’an suddenly asked me, “Sansheng, is Moxi the reincarnation of...”

I glanced back to Chang’an and said, “Yes, but that belongs to the past.”

Not wishing to waste more words, I recited an incantation and went directly to Rongshan.

At the foothill of Rongshan was a fortress called Rongcheng – built on the mountainside and surrounded by steep cliffs. It was easily defensible and difficult to attack, but once the fortress was captured, it’d be fairly easy to charge into the capital. Rongcheng was hence the court’s last stronghold of the Imperial City. This poison the water source in Rongcheng, or light fire on their granary, or something similar.

By the time I got to Rongshan, however, I hadn’t the need to do any of these things.

The armies had engaged.

I searched for his shadow from above the chaotic battlefield. He could not speak, so how did he give orders in battles?

While I was on pins and needles, a small voice slowly traveled, belonging to only a few people at first, then expanding to dozens, hundreds, and thousands, and finally all of the rebel soldiers chanted:

“The fortress keeper has been beheaded!”

“The fortress keeper has been beheaded!”

The riotous battlefield momentarily quieted down in solemnity. All eyes slowly converged at one spot. I naturally also turned to look that way.

Mountain winds suddenly picked up, sending flowers on Rongshan raining across my ears and down to the battlefield, drifting to that man in waves.

He was carrying a decapitated head sitting on horseback. The distance was too far for me to see his face. I only saw sunlight bouncing off of his cold sword, so blindingly that my eyes began to tear.

It was Moxi!

I hadn't expected this separation would last two long decades.

You've become a brave general who proudly stands above thousands.

I'd left you for so long. Did you resent me?

Suddenly, I perceived a flash out of the corner of my eye. A sharp arrow was flying straight for Moxi who was on horseback. I panicked. A beam of dark energy instantaneously followed the arrow, and at the moment the arrow almost pierced into Moxi's chest, it sliced the arrow shaft in half. But because the arrowhead still had momentum, it grazed Moxi's face despite having swerved off its original track, and then plunged into the ground behind him.

Everything happened in a split second. I anxiously kept my eyes peeled to see

whether he was hurt anywhere or not.

He also made a sudden upward gaze as he stared in my direction. I knew it was too far for him to see me clearly, but I had a strange feeling that he did and that he knew I was Sansheng.

The soldiers reacted and promptly surrounded Moxi in a circle.

I could see Moxi even less clearly now, causing me to burn with anxiousness. The troops around Moxi all of a sudden dispersed as he

tossed the decapitated head in his hand to a soldier nearby, then lightly trod on horseback and swiftly flew toward where I was.

This time, I was sure he saw me.

I turned around and left the rock cliff. I daydreamed about the place I would be reuniting with Moxi. It should be a wonderful place complete with falling petals, amid which he would hug me and I would hug him, calling his name over and over again. We'd then develop that inexplicable urge to do a bit of those ooh ooh ah ah things and finally go find a place to properly take care of that urge.

Yes! It'd be a fairy tale come true!

Unfortunately, it was difficult for us to get in the mood for those ooh ooh ah ah things by the time Moxi found me, the reason being that right before he saw me, I had stepped onto a snare the hunters had left in the mountains.

Snap. My ankle was clamped tightly. It couldn't have wounded me for real, but it did hurt quite badly.

While I was near tears and accusing Heaven of being blind, a figure besmirched in the bloodiness of battle swiftly walked over. I still couldn't make out his face for he was lowering his head to carefully remove the snare for me. Afterwards, he rolled my trousers up to check whether the injury had reached my bones.

The large and warm hands that were holding my ankles trembled slightly, as if they were tensed, as if they were excited, but also as if they were abashed.

"Moxi!"

He stiffened. Without any decorum, I removed his helmet for him. I cupped his cheeks and slowly lifted his face.

Gazing at his blood-stained face, I didn't expect to see eyes so eternally transparent even after his shares of battles and intrigues. I sighed:

“You’re grown now so this must be embarrassing for you, but Sansheng really can’t wait anymore. What am I going to do?”

He didn’t know what I was going on about.

The moment my lips inched near, his eyes abruptly widened. I sighed inwardly, but still placed a kiss onto his lips in the end.

“Moxi, Moxi...” I clung onto his neck, rubbing my cheek onto his temple whispering:

“I miss you so much, Sansheng misses you.”

His body went as rigid as iron. Even more rigid was his neck, refusing to tilt toward me for even half an inch. It was too tiring to cling onto him so I simply let him go, choosing to stare at him with a smile instead. “I’ve come for you, so why do you still have this look on your face?”

He slightly recovered at these words. My reflection gradually took form in his eyes.

He slowly raised his hand, as if he couldn’t believe he could touch my cheek. I beamed at him, letting his rough fingers slowly graze my face – my eyes, my nose, my lips, over and over again as if to test whether the one standing in front of him was real and alive.

Finally, he hugged me with shaking hands, a long sigh drifting into my ears – a sigh that finally dispelled all the grief and sorrow of parting we had kept buried. I reckoned even if he could speak, he’d still only sigh in my ear right now.

Because we had been separated for too long, there was too much to say that our time was better used in embracing.

Unsurprisingly, he brought me back to the camp.

The use of a spell would have easily fixed the wound on my foot, but I had chanted to make it look even worse. When he saw that the bleeding

couldn't be stopped, the crease in Moxi's brow had deepened. He transferred me onto his back and headed straightaway for the camp.

I reveled in the feeling of being so deeply cared for.

I received countless salutes from the soldiers while I was on his back. What they saw wasn't a man carrying a woman, but rather a fairy carrying a witch, their eyeballs nearly popping out from their sockets.

I had never cared about how others saw me, but Moxi was afraid that these rough men would give me a hard time. His expression frosted up as he slowly swept his eyes across them. Instantaneously, everyone around us withdrew his gaze.

Amid the warmth in my heart, I pressed even closer to Moxi.

When we got to the main tent, I lifted aside the curtain for him and promptly saw a woman sitting inside.

A woman...

"Moxi," I felt my mind leaving me. "Did you get married in the time I was away?" I sadly asked.

15: I'll never trade

Moxi got married?

I glanced blankly from Moxi back to the woman.

"Moxi!"

She happily got up when she saw Moxi coming in. At my presence, she immediately stopped and hesitated: "She is..."

I clung onto Moxi's neck. "My name is Sansheng."

"Sansheng..." she muttered my name as her face suddenly darkened.

"Sansheng?"

"You're Sansheng?" As though she didn't believe me, she looked to Moxi for confirmation.

Seeing her sad expression, I couldn't help but also look at Moxi. Moxi, however, ignored the both of us. He strode to the bed, laid me down, removed my shoes and socks for me, and then got up and hastily wrote "ask for the army doctor" onto a piece of paper to hand to the other woman.

She froze for a while before finally smiling sadly and staggering out of the tent.

"Is she... your wife?"

He was cleansing my wound for me when I said this. He heard my words. He raised his head to look at me, a smile gradually rippling in his eyes. He gently shook his head.

I nodded and said sternly: "Good, because I won't let you."

With the same gentle smile, he pulled my hand and gently wrote onto my palm:

"Besides Sansheng, I've never had anyone."

I was surprised to see him write so seriously. I scratched my head and at length cleared my throat, putting on a mature mien while caressing his hair and saying:

"You're so dashing and I've been away from you for so long that I really wonder how many girls have lost their hearts to you. But you're so cold and slow... I feel sorry for these poor girls. Is it a good thing that you're like this or not, I wonder sometimes."

At these words, Moxi stared at me with a slight chagrin.

Most of the time, I didn't know why he was angry. This time, I didn't know the reason either. Not wanting to bother guessing, I said, "But Sansheng has always been selfish. Your being unfriendly and indifferent to other girls... is more to my liking."

"Moxi, have you drugged me with something? Why do I like you so much? Why am

I so reluctant to let others touch you even for a tiny bit?"

He kept peering at me, his eyes gleaming bright.

At this time, the army doctor arrived. Moxi diverted his gaze and gave his seat to the doctor.

Since my wound was made from my own spell, it was only natural that the doctor couldn't detect anything. He just announced that it was an external wound before bandaging it and taking his leave.

Having the space to ourselves again, I eagerly caught Moxi's sleeve so I could complain to him about how much I'd missed him. I hadn't even warmed his sleeve, however, by the time a soldier called for him from outside the tent.

Moxi's face sank as he immediately got up and walked out. I watched his sleeve leave my hands, the soldier's calling ringing into my ears. I sighed. Twenty years had really been too long of a separation.

Sansheng may still be important to Moxi, but she wasn't the most important anymore.

The war would not stop just because the general had picked up a woman on the side of the road.

I saw Moxi very little after we reunited. With the coming of the last battle, there was a strange air hanging above the army, almost restless, almost unsettled, and almost charged, even. Moxi was so swamped that he didn't even have the time to rest.

I didn't care at all what the outcome of the war was going to be; I only cared about Moxi.

Recently, as I followed the rapidly marching troops, I had been pondering what it was Moxi could not seek as part of his trial. He was now a general. He had power, he had riches. What could he possibly want but couldn't have?

Because we'd been separated for so long, I thought I should ask Moxi directly for an answer.

When night fell, I asked several night-watchmen before I was told Moxi had left the military campground with Miss Ah Rou.

Ah Rou was the woman I saw the other day. I heard she was Bai Jiu's foster daughter and had been very close to Moxi since childhood. She was almost universally considered to be the general's wife. After hearing that, I had faintly nodded and declined to comment.

But today, in the middle of the night...

I couldn't help myself from feeling hurt. I quickened my pace and circled the camp for a long time before I at last found their figures in the forest.

Ah Rou was sobbing: "Moxi, how did it become this way, how..." I halted, turned and hid behind a tree. "He is after all the master who raised you," Ah Rou said in misery. "Why do you have to drive him into a corner? Do you want the kingdom that much?"

I froze at her words. I slightly stuck my head out to see Moxi indifferently extracting his sleeve from Ah Rou's hand while writing something onto her palm. Ah Rou widened her eyes in surprise: "Moxi, are you mad?!"

Moxi stared at her quietly.

"Even though you two aren't blood related, she is like your sister, your mother. You actually want to... you really want to..." Ah Rou suddenly

came to realization: “The reason you want the throne... Moxi, you want to reach the top so that nobody can stand in your way? So that you can marry her?”

Moxi’s expression iced up. He wrote a few more words onto her hand and in the end left by himself.

Ah Rou stood in place for some time. She seemed to recover eventually, but when she took two steps, as if she had lost all her strength, she leaned on a tree and slowly slid to the ground. I thought for a little while before finally coming out. I offered her my hand, waiting for her to pull herself up.

She looked at me, startled: “Aunt... auntie Sansheng.”

I ignored the way she called me and said, “I already heard everything.”

Tears immediately pooled in Ah Rou’s eyes, delicate and pitiful. She cried: “Auntie, only you can persuade Moxi now. Please persuade him, please!”

“Why should I?”

If Moxi wanted the throne, I wouldn’t be the sole reason like Ah Rou said. He was the God of War; his heart would always think for the common people. No matter how he reincarnated, that duty and pride would always be ingrained inside of him.

He must have had his reasons for wanting the throne, but no matter what the reasons were, I had no right to persuade him to give up his goal.

Ah Rou was taken aback by my question. “Because, because... foster father... he will be ruthless to foster father, he...”

I sighed: “Moxi is too kindhearted to be ruthless to your father. But I can’t say the same for your father, Bai Qi.” I didn’t want to continue explaining to her. I pulled her up and said as I turned to leave: “It was

my mistake to have left Moxi with you people all these years. None of you understand him. He must have not lived very happily.”

By the time I got back to the camp, I heard the sound of zither coming from Moxi’s tent from a distance away. Pleasantly surprised, I picked up my pace. I smelled the scent of plum blossoms the moment I lifted the curtain and stepped inside. The chords paused as Moxi looked up at me. Although he was smiling, his smile did not reach his eyes.

My heart ached, but I did not show it. I smiled and played the fool, walking around

Moxi to give him a big hug from behind. I hung onto his neck, loathing to let go.

He slightly stiffened. I pressed close to his ears but did not speak, letting each other listen to the other’s warm rhythm.

I don’t know how long had passed before Moxi, as if finally recovered, gently patted my hand and motioned me to sit beside him. He took out a bough of plum next to the zither table and then wrote onto a sheet of paper: “I remember plum blossoms were your favorite. Today, I came across this flowering bough so I brought it back for you.”

I received the bough, held it in my hand and admired it over and over, inhaling the familiar scent.

“Do you like it?”

As if they were softly strummed, my heartstrings made a quiver when I saw the four hesitant words on the white parchment.

“I love it.” I took his hand and caressed the hard callous on its palm.

“All the flowers in the world can’t be exchanged for the one you picked for me.”

He curled his fingers around my hand, clasping so tightly that it hurt me.

“Moxi, play a song for me. I always loved listening to you when you were younger.”

I smiled: “I want to hear something exhilarating!”

Moxi gave a nod. His fingertips swept across the strings to weave a soaring melody.

There was a murderous intent like that which swept across battlefields, there was an imperious spirit of world domination, and there was even a trace of retrospection from a hero who stood alone, all sonorously played.

The piece came to a crescendo towards the end, but in it was a certain vicissitude.

The notes next quickened, as if every unspoken feeling was now being poured out.

While the residual resonance was still lingering in the air, I suddenly asked, “Moxi, do you want the throne?”

His hands stilled the strings, bringing the unfinished reverberation to a halting stop.

He didn’t look at me, staring at the strings instead when he nodded.

I laughed and said, “Then fight for it. I’ll follow you.” I placed the plum bough on top of the strings, caught his right hand and whispered, “This time, I won’t leave you.”

After that night, Moxi became even more swamped.

On the day they would be attacking the imperial fortress and right before going to the battlefield, Moxi suddenly dismounted his horse and, in front of everyone, clasped me in his arms. Despite feeling uncomfortable by the hard armor, I didn’t push him away. I let him linger by my side like a child for a while before I patted him on the shoulder: “Don’t worry, go.”

But how could I let him go to the battlefield alone? If I had to guess, what Moxi couldn't seek as part of his trial was the throne. If he was destined to lose the throne, then I could at least help him stay strong after his defeat. We'd find a quiet place and live in peace for the rest of this life.

By the time he finished his three trials, the three lifetimes he promised me would also end. From that point on, we'd go our separate ways. He'd still be a superior god in Heaven while I'd continue to be an undying spirit in the underworld.

A perfect arrangement, wouldn't you say?

When Moxi's figure went out of sight, I recited an invisible spell and trailed behind the army.

The last battle played out with little suspense. So hopeless was the emperor's plight that the soldiers defending his city were merely putting up futile resistance. The siege was smoothly carried out with nary a hitch in the plan. Just past noon, Moxi led his army into the city straight to the palace.

A strange feeling told me things were going too smoothly.

As if to confirm my suspicions, a white solitary figure was standing on the palace wall waiting for Moxi by the time he arrived, looking down at him and his army from above.

Bai Qi.

He must be forty or fifty by now. For a mortal, it was a feat for him to still have the energy to kick up a ruckus.

He waved his sleeve at which time archers suddenly emerged on the wall. They drew their bows, all pointing at Moxi.

The troops were in a commotion – and so they should. Bai Qi was the rebel leader; Moxi was the general in command who captured the series of fortresses. Now that they almost reached the palace, the two men

were suddenly in conflict. Everyone must want to know what was going on.

Bai Qi brought out a man's decapitated head from behind him and bellowed: "The tyrant has been beheaded! Comrades, we've won the war!"

After a period of silence, hundreds and thousands of soldiers erupted in cheering roars.

My gaze fell upon the figure on horseback. Bai Qi had beaten him to the beheading of the emperor and had therefore manipulated everyone into regarding him as the new ruler. I finally realized why he had gone back to the capital while Moxi was still in the front line of the battlefield. I reckoned it must have been for this moment.

Bai Qi waited for the soldiers to gradually quiet down before saying: "There are numerous people who want to rule this splendid empire, but never did I expect that you would be one of those who stoop to treacherous methods for it!"

Though his voice was moderate, Bai Qi's strong internal energy carried it to everyone's ears clearly. His condemnation hushed the masses into silence.

"Moxi, you were eight when I took you in as my disciple. It has been twenty years since then. Everything I knew in life, I have taught you, but you have repeatedly sent people to assassinate me for this throne. I'm sorely disappointed. The tyrant has been removed on this day. It's now also time to remove the disloyal and unconscionable student!"

I could only sigh as I watched the surprise in everyone's expression. Despite being surrounded by a legion, his solitary figure on horseback made me feel a keen loneliness.

He couldn't speak, so even if he were wronged, he could never prove himself.

At this moment, someone on the palace wall suddenly shot an arrow straight at Moxi. I panicked. Right as I was about to act, I saw that Moxi did not try to dodge but raised his bow instead. Before anyone could react, Moxi's arrow had split the first in half. A cry instantly sounded from the wall – an archer had fallen.

The crowd was aghast.

Even I was a little surprised. I didn't expect Moxi's shooting to be so accurate.

"Don't!" a sharp female voice suddenly rose from the rear of the army. A woman stumbled to Moxi: "Don't! Moxi, don't! No matter what, he was still the master who raised you! Moxi..."

Ah Rou's sudden appearance spooked Moxi's horse. Not a patient animal, it reared and looked as though it was going to step on Ah Rou with its hooves. Moxi pulled on the reins, but as if the horse were mad, he had no way to control it.

All the while, I had seen with my own eyes that someone had shot a projectile at Moxi's horse. They wanted people to see him trample Ah Rou to death so that his wicked notoriety would become true. Anger burned inside of me. It was fine if my Moxi couldn't seek the throne, but I'd never let you people harm him like this!

I waved my sleeve, sending forces of darkness straight at Ah Rou and pushing her several feet backward.

I showed myself and landed in front of Moxi's horse. Drawing spiritual energy to my palm, I extracted the projectile from the horse and flung it back. That soldier grunted and fell over.

My unforeseen appearance affrighted everyone. They shouted 'monster' and kept backing far away, enclosing Moxi and me in a circle.

Moxi dismounted his horse and then grasped my hands. He was visibly angry as he hastily wrote onto my palm: "Go back."

“By your side is where I need to be. Where do you want me to go?”

I thus asked, and Moxi momentarily had no answer to give.

I didn’t understand the expression brewing in his eyes. Suddenly, it occurred to me that even though I wanted to stay with him all my life, did he want the same thing?

Would he still think about the throne and resent me later on...? I couldn’t be sure, so I turned and asked him, “Moxi, if I can help you seize the throne, but from now on there will be no Sansheng... if it’s Sansheng for the throne, will you trade?”

He stared at me, his eyes becoming increasingly bewildered.

At that instant, Bai Qi suddenly spoke: “Sansheng, you raised Moxi up like a sister, like a mother, yet he developed untoward ideas for you. Why do you still want to save him?”

Whispers rose around us. Moxi gripped my hand tightly. He was extremely furious, but he couldn’t look any colder. He stared at Bai Qi with a murderous intent that gave me chills. I patted Moxi’s hand to appease him and laughed when I suddenly got why Bai Qi had helped Moxi rescue me. He wanted me to become a pawn to control Moxi. He wanted to completely ruin him!

“Bai Jiu, there’s something I recently often wonder about. Had I not saved you because of Moxi’s kindheartedness back then, our lives may not have turned out this way today.”

A slight change came over Bai Qi’s face. Moxi lowered his head.

“But we can’t turn back time. Moxi and I had saved you, and here we are today. I have never liked you, probably due to a certain foreboding I have. You say Moxi returns favor with wickedness, but in my opinion you are the real betrayer! After you taught Moxi martial arts, you made him fight your battles. You get to be the leader while this child sacrifices his life for you. Now that he captures the fortress, you say he wants your throne and try to get rid of him. Bai Jiu, do you think you can just take

advantage of Moxi's inability to speak and make up whatever lies you please?"

"Humph! Demoness, cease your slanderous accusations!" He waved his sleeves as arrows flew at us. Moxi pulled me behind him to shield me.

I scoffed: "Even my slander is better than your bullshit." Dark forces from my palm blasted the arrows away.

I still wanted to curse him out, but I all of a sudden felt something rapidly flying at us from behind. I whacked it to the side without paying much attention.

Unexpectedly, that thing exploded.

Shit! My eyes blurred. I instinctively reached for Moxi's hand to shield him but in my panic, I was unable to grab onto him. Then everything darkened as I felt a heaviness weighing down on me.

I heard popping cracks, and then warm liquid ran down my cheek, smelling of pungent blood. Realizing what it was, chills coursed through my trembling body.

"Moxi!"

No one answered me. In this life, he had never answered me.

After those sounds abated, the body pressing on top of me still didn't move. My hands shook as I climbed out from underneath. When I saw what was happening, my mind instantly blanked.

"Moxi!"

The armor protecting him had shattered, countless needles pinning his back. For a second, I didn't know where to touch him.

He lay face down on the ground, soiled with dirt. His shut eyes were no longer looking at me with tenderness, but he was tugging my sleeve the same way he had as a kid, afraid I would walk too fast and leave him behind.

My gaze dropped to my sleeve and the bloodstained words on it: "I'll never trade."

I smiled dazedly, suddenly realizing the stupidity of my question.

Moxi was dead.

Despite knowing he was just completing his trial and going back to the place I was only too familiar with, I still could not contain the grief surging from within. It drowned me. Now that he had finished his trial, gone was also our only connection.

It wasn't possible to stay together any longer. There would also be no next life.

I buried my head into his cheek that had grown cold. Mingled with the pungent bloody smell was a sudden burst of fragrance – the fragrance of plums.

I smiled to see a red plum flower falling out from his lapels, but desolation consumed my heart.

"Moxi, do you know why I like plum blossoms?" I whispered. "Because our fate had started with this muted fragrance. I like it only because I got to meet you."

I only knew now why Moxi would become so angry every time he went to the underworld for his reincarnation. He was angry because I hadn't known how to love myself, causing him this awful pain.

"The traitor is dead, capture the demoness!" someone shouted.

A terrible bloodthirst suddenly rose inside of me. Moxi had died. He and I would no longer meet. Without Moxi, what had I left to linger to? Yanwang prohibited me from killing, but these people had gone too far. So what if I killed them all?!

I was originally born at the Wangchuan River. I was born in the land of the dead.

What was I afraid of? These mortals were ignorant of their own foolishness. Killing them all would leave this world a more peaceful place.

I looked up to Bai Qi, who was standing on top of the distant tower, and laughed.

Like mournful cries of phantoms, my laughter carried in it a thousand years of darkness from the Wangchuan River.

How could any mortal survive this? Soon, horror wailed by my ears.

But I relished in this sound. I laughed more and more delightedly.

Hundreds and thousands of soldiers started bleeding from their seven apertures. I didn't give a damn. I just wanted to mass murder so that streams of blood would wind around the palace and contaminate its air of awe.

"Sansheng!"

Amid the screams, a sobering voice made its way to my ears.

I stopped laughing and looked around only to see it was Chang'an.

He was dressed in Liubo garments. For a brief moment, I almost thought I was seeing Zhonghua. My eyes burned; a tear rolled down. I wiped it away only to see blood on my hand.

The Sansheng Stone's tears of blood.

Chang'an seemed so wistful. "Sansheng, don't give into darkness. Don't develop wicked thoughts."

Humph.

Chang'an sighed: "Sansheng, please consider carefully. Slaughtering is against the laws of Heaven and Earth. You shall have to suffer the punishment of losing your soul. This is nothing but a trial. You are

helping Moxi cross his trial but you're destroying the cultivation you've accumulated for a whole millennium."

"So what?" I chuckled. "I am a stone, and that is what I will remain even without my soul. It'll save me from worrying about worldly things. What is so bad about it?"

These people have killed Moxi. I don't care if it's Moxi's tribulation. The reality is that they've killed him. There's nothing wrong with my wanting them to pay an eye for an eye."

"Sansheng," Changan's expression was full of grief, "it pains you to lose Moxi, but these hundreds of thousands of people are also living beings. Like you, they have loved ones. If you killed them, what would their loved ones do?"

I stiffened, looking back at those people. Some were still struggling in agony, while others had stopped breathing altogether like Moxi, lying on the ground, quietly, motionlessly...

They shouldn't have killed Moxi, but neither did I have the right to kill them.

The dark forces in my body dissipated. The horror in the vicinity also diminished to small sobbing sounds.

It suddenly occurred to me that these three lifetimes were but a happy dream Moxi had given me. Sooner or later I would have to wake up from it. Now that Moxi was gone, I was just waking up a little sooner.

"Chang'an, since you can look into Heaven's will, strive for divine cultivation. You'll find success in time to come."

I went back to Moxi's side, reaching for his hand and touching his already icy cheek.

If these three lives were now finished, then let's end here.

I slowly closed my eyes and severed my own veins.

My soul drifted away. This time, the Black and White Guards of Impermanence didn't come to take me. In their place was the frigid judge working by Yanwang's side. He made a stroke with the brush in his hand whereupon my wrists weighed down with an iron chain. "Sansheng, you've committed murder," he said. "I'm here to take you back to await your judgment."

I gave a nod and said nothing more in reply.

Epilogue: Death exists not

'Remove her heart!'

Yanwang solemnly wrote down these words.

For the first time in my existence, I was kneeling in Yanwang's palace and kowtowing to him.

In the human world, I had killed at least thousands of people and had thereby played havoc with the cycle of reincarnation. Having my heart removed was an already very lenient punishment. Yanwang had likely faced great pressure behind the scenes because of me.

Before I was sent to Purgatory to receive my punishment, the Black Guard of Impermanence sighed to me: "As a stone, it hasn't been easy for you to gain some cognizance but now you're going to have your heart removed... You'll still be a spiritual being, but how will you be any different from a rock that can move?"

"Don't I still have my brain?"

Black Impermanence continued to shake his head sighingly. Little Jia and Little Yi likewise carried a mournful expression on their faces. Only White Impermanence kept his everyday cold countenance: "Do you regret it?"

I knew what he was asking. Moxi should know by now that I'd returned to the underworld. He had now overcome his tribulations. As a god, if he were to plead for me, it was very possible I could avoid punishment. In the eyes of others, moreover, my being punished was mostly due to Moxi.

But he did nothing at all. He didn't even come to see me in the underworld.

I gave some thought, shook my head and answered, "I have no regrets."

"Why?"

I glanced back at the endless Yellow Springs. There, ghosts continued to descend, but all I saw were those glamorous yet lonely amaryllises on the roadside. Just like the day I first saw Moxi, sunlight from the land of the living was sprinkling over the ground, illuminating the flowers with its radiance.

"What a coincidence that I should see this scenery again. But what can I do?" I sighed and poked fun at myself: "Maybe once I lose my heart, I will come to regret it after all."

White Impermanence said nothing more. He sent me to the place of punishment and then turned to leave.

The heart-removing process went by smoothly. The ghost who carried out my sentence acted with swiftness. By the time I felt the tip of the blade piercing into me, my warm beating heart had been taken from the cavity of my chest. Only until the wound was sutured did I feel any pain.

It turned out a stone without its heart could still ache.

There was a rule in the underworld that forbade the punished from receiving anyone else's help. I thus crawled back into the Sansheng Stone by myself that day, blood coursing down my chest and dripping to the ground from my soaked clothes.

Later, while I recuperated inside the stone, Little Jia privately came to tell me that a certain fragrant flowers had grown from the trail of blood I left on the ground.

Some called them plum blossoms. They were very pretty, he told me.

I didn't believe him at first.

The underworld was a lifeless place. It had always been a land of the dead. Besides a few bored gods who occasionally came down to visit from Heaven, there had never been a living thing here. How could this hell grow its own flowers?

It was much later that I also began to smell the fragrance of plums from inside my stone.

"Sansheng," Little Yi said to me, "you've been dwelling among these beautiful red flowers for so long that you're almost no longer like us."

I really didn't know what he was talking about and didn't bother to think about it.

After my heart was removed, as though I had become much freer, those feelings of curiosity and reluctance all gradually faded. Only, I still sometimes saw Moxi's image.

Nevertheless, I believed that as time slowly passed, this beautiful image would disappear from my mind one day.

Just as there would be a day when my chest wound healed and not even a scar remained.

When my wound got better, I was able to leave the stone and take a few short steps. Those plum blossoms everyone told me about had long withered.

I did not feel the slightest regret. More than ever, I was convinced that these things, be it the sunlight from the land of the living, the alluring and fragrant plum blossoms, or even Moxi who was as gentle as jade,

should all become things of the past, things easily whisked away in the fluttering wind.

Life in the underworld went by not much differently from before. I continued to take my daily walk along the Wangchuan and lean against the stone to read books brought down from the human world each day.

The longing once concealed inside of me simply became a memory. Romantic stories also ceased to give my chest those throbbing beats.

One day, I returned from the Wangchuan riverbank. I looked up and again happened to see that figure standing next to me.

One of his hands was placed on the stone, his dark eyes gazing downwards. I couldn't be sure what he was thinking, only feeling that everything had frozen with time in that stand-still moment.

"Moxi..." I parted my lips, faintly calling the two syllables I hadn't called in a long time.

He slowly looked up at my call.

Seeing the face I hadn't seen for so long, I couldn't help but bring my hand to my chest, to the empty place where no beating heart still resided.

But why was it that I couldn't help wanting to cry?

And then it dawned on me. It wasn't that I didn't miss him, I was just forcing myself to not miss him, fearing the overwhelming memories would someday burst.

He was warmly smiling at me in my increasingly blurred vision. "Didn't you say you want to seduce me? How can you hope to catch my attention with such a silly appearance?"

I stood motionless.

He smiled and held out his hand to me: "Sansheng, come over and let me take a look at you."

My feet moved on their own to him. He stroked my hair: “Haven’t you always hated other people touching your hair?”

I honestly nodded: “That’s because it isn’t easy for a stone to grow hair.”

“Then are you upset that I’m touching your hair like this?”

I shook my head. “No, because you’re Moxi.”

His eyes crinkled in satisfaction. “You are now the God of War,” I said to him. “I can’t beat you anymore.” His hand suddenly paused, resting heavily on my hair.

“Even if I could, I still wouldn’t be able to do it,” I told him.

“Don’t have the heart to?”

“Don’t have the heart to.”

He was quiet. He suddenly reached out to hold my hand, our fingers tightly interlacing. “Sansheng, come with me to Heaven. Since you love plum blossoms so much, how would you like to become the Plum Fairy?”

I looked up at him and saw that he was being perfectly serious. I knew he wasn’t joking. I unconsciously backed away in fright, wanting to break away from his hold.

He tightened his grasp.

I suddenly panicked. “I’m only a spirit in the underworld, the Sansheng Stone that’s full of darkness. I shouldn’t go to Heaven. Moreover, I have now lost my heart...”

Moxi sighed: “Sansheng, you spent three lifetimes to chase me. Now that you’ve finally succeeded, you want to turn and run? This won’t do. I can’t let you go.”

“What... did you say?”

“You’ve caught me, Sansheng.”

I was dumbfounded.

Moxi took out a round glowing object from inside his lapels. “I wanted to wait a little longer before giving this to you.” He recited an incantation as the object in his hand blazed and, in an instant, vanished. Forthwith, warmth filled my chest. The warmth I hadn’t felt for a long time was diffusing in my chest once more.

My heart.

Moxi had returned my heart to me.

Surging emotions suffocated my chest and sent aching warmth coursing through my body. “Moxi, I... I...” Tears filled my eyes. “I was born at the Wangchuan River so I’ve never truly lived. Since I’ve been in the land of the dead for so long, I’m afraid I won’t know how to be alive.”

He gently stroked my cheek. “This is the place that has nurtured Sansheng, and my Sansheng is the bravest spiritual being that I have ever known, so how can you not know how to be alive?”

“Sansheng, death exists not at the River of Oblivion.”

He softly caressed my hair. “Will you come with me to Heaven and do me the honor of being the God of War’s wife?”

“You’ve fallen for me, haven’t you?”

“Hook, line, and sinker,” he sighed.

I lowered my head and fell into his embrace, gently wrapping my arms around his waist and pressing my face against his chest.

“Is that a yes?”

“Yes.”



-THE END-

Bonus Story 1: We Part Though We Love

It was another quiet night in the capital.

The night-watchman struck the midnight hour yawningly as he went around the small alley behind the prime minister's estate.

Candlelight flickered on the other side of the short walls surrounding the prime minister's home. The watchman peered into the yard on tiptoe. The plum forest was still there. Now just past winter, the plum blossoms had fallen off and given way to a few sparse budding leaves. When the wind blew, only dry branches swayed desolately.

A simple house stood inside the plum forest, emitting a soft glow at this time. Rumors had it the prime minister did not care for luxury and that he slept in this modest residence every day.

Baloney! The watchman pursed his lips. What 'sleeping'? The prime minister obviously stayed up nearly every night. He had been a night-watchman for as long as His Excellency had lived here, and every night, he saw the light left on in the prime minister's room.

The watchman was even more curious compared to other people. What kind of person was this prime minister anyhow? He clearly had the power to topple the world, being the man who was under one person but over everyone else, yet he preferred to live in such an ordinary abode. Wasn't he worried someone would try to assassinate him? Or was he so sure of his upright posture that he wasn't afraid of having crooked shadows? Did he never need to sleep?

And yet, matters concerning the upperclassmen weren't something a night-watchman like him could fathom to understand. So he continued to yawn while speculating this and that before staggering away.

The watchman wasn't aware that after he left, the door on that simple log cabin squeaked open. A man hurriedly ran out as if he was chasing after something, but when he got to the empty yard, he suddenly paused in his tracks

He looked around into the emptiness.

His body was thinly built, his complexion showing a sickly paleness. He appeared to be in his thirties but half of his hair was already grayed. He would probably fall ill from a chilly night wind.

It was thus a surprise that this man who appeared to be so frail was no other than the prime minister who called all the shots in the imperial court.

Moxi sighed and laughed at himself. "Another dream!"

Spring evenings are cold. He had rushed out of the room dressed in only a thin garment. Standing in the courtyard, he silently gazed at the moon for a while, then all of a sudden softly said, "Why won't you let me finish my dream even when I'm only dreaming?"



He slowly walked to the plum forest behind the house. A small tombstone stood under a plum tree, on which the words “My wife Sansheng” were deeply engraved. He sat down next to the tombstone. Looking at the red plum blossoms that had fallen off of their branches, he whispered: “Why haven’t you come back to see me? Don’t you miss me? I miss you day and night.”

“I have petitioned to the emperor for the general’s entire clan to receive judgment. You don’t have to be jealous of Shi Qianqian so foolishly anymore, nor do you have to be harassed by them. When I was little, you always said I was too softhearted. You just didn’t know that I’m only softhearted with you. I only don’t know what to do when it’s you.”

“Sansheng, won’t you say something?”

The wind swept across his cheeks, chilling him to the bones.

“Sansheng,” he pleaded, “stop playing hide and seek with Moxi. You know I’m most afraid of not finding you.”

“I’m most afraid of not finding you...”

“How can you hide from me for so long?”

Of course no one was there to answer him, of course no one was there to suddenly jump out from behind the plum tree, and of course no one was there to stare fixedly at him, asking him to wed her.

“Tomorrow, alright? After they are beheaded at the market square, stop being angry and come back to me. I’ll wait for you.” He kept talking to himself, not caring that there was no one answering back.

That night, Moxi spent the night leaning against Sansheng’s tombstone in a thin robe.

The next day when he left court, his vision suddenly grew blurry. The official beside him quickly held out a hand and asked, “Are you feeling unwell, Your Excellency? Your complexion seems quite poor.”

Moxi softly coughed twice and then waved to say he was all right. But after two steps, his coughing increasingly worsened and, for a moment, he could not keep straight. The ministers surrounded him, one asking: “Do we need to report to His Majesty about today’s beheading at noon?”

“No need,” Moxi coldly interrupted the man and gave him a glare. He then covered his mouth to muffle his coughs and left by himself.

None of the ministers behind him dared to go on with their concerns.

The minister who was snapped at smiled quite awkwardly. Another who was close to him whispered into his ear and said, “Everyone knows His Excellency had waited so many years for this day. Your words have stirred trouble.”

The man went blue as he looked after the prime minister’s gaunt back drifting further away and let out a sigh of remorse.

By the time Moxi got out of the palace, someone was already waiting with a palanquin. He lifted the curtain and was about to step inside when he noticed a familiar figure. He looked up. So it was the Imperial Reverend.

Feeling a little affected, he couldn’t help but cough twice.

These were both overly proud men. Normally, neither bent to greet each other, and yet the Imperial Reverend was approaching Moxi today.

The Imperial Reverend spoke first: “The rest of the clan wasn’t related to that incident. The enmity only involves a few people, why implicate the innocent?”

Moxi coughed terribly. He took a while to calm down, faintly smiling. “Your words are a little too late.”

The Imperial Reverend was silent and then sighed at length. “It was all my fault back then. It was I who sinned, so it should be I who pay.”

Moxi paid him no further attention, lowering himself into his chaise that soon blended into the hustle and bustle of the capital.

The market square.

Moxi sat on the sentencing bench looking to the execution grounds. There had once been a tall scaffold here that burned his Sansheng to death.

His life’s only Sansheng.

A chest pain abruptly pricked him. Moxi lowered his head to conceal his expression.

Noon was nearing. He waved. The first batch of prisoners came onto the scaffold. The general had bitten his tongue and killed himself in prison. This group only consisted of his wives, his three sons, and his only daughter – Shi Qianqian.

Moxi covered his mouth coughing for a while. The guard standing next to him looked to the sun and asked whether they should begin the execution. He nodded. The guard raised his hand and had yet to give command when the disheveled woman suddenly shrieked and said, “Moxi! Next life! Next life I will make sure to never like you! I also curse you to an eternal separation from the person you love! You shall never be able to be with her.”

Answering her was only a burst of whooping coughs.

The executioner behind Shi Qianqian went over to muffle her mouth. Shi Qianqian desperately struggled as she shouted: “In this life, you punish my clan. If there is a next life, I shall have you kill the person you love with your own hands! You and she will never be together!”

Moxi was incensed by her words. The fury in his eyes terrified the guards by his side.

Moxi suppressed the trembling in his chest. He removed the tablet on the table and threw it onto the ground: “Stirring up a ruckus on the execution grounds is adding another crime to your crimes. Cut across her back!”

Everyone was aghast upon hearing his order.

Shi Qianqian seemed to have gone mad as she laughed to the sky. “You two will never get a good ending! Do you think she will come back? She’s dead! She’s dead!”

Moxi fisted his hands in a death grip, his normally gentle and courteous voice at this time was pricklier than ice: “Cut across her back. I want her to watch how her entire clan is exterminated.”

That day, blood spilled over the ground at the market square. The woman’s crying and screaming still echoed in the air after the execution ended, gratingly like the bemoaning of phantoms. In the end, her corpse was hastily wrapped up like everyone else’s, discarded in some parts unknown.

Thereafter, the prime minister’s reputation as the “nice gentleman” ceased to exist.

Moxi fell sick that night, bedridden. The emperor ordered the imperial doctor to check on him. When the diagnoses came out, it was said to be tuberculosis. The entire court was gripped with astonishment.

But the sick one seemed indifferent to it all. He relied on medicines to get through those days of ill health then came right back to court and took care of business as usual. He spoke nothing of it and no one knew to what extent he was sick. He seemed to everyone no different from an ordinary person. None saw him coughing too badly either.

Over time, everyone forgot he had tuberculosis.

It was another long winter.

Plum blossoms flowered splendidly in the yard. Draped in a coat, Moxi stood in front of his log cabin watching the plum forest for a long time. He stood there until it got so dark that one couldn't see anything before slowly returning to the house and lighting the candle. The awful paleness on his face was illuminated under the candlelight, accompanied by hollow cheeks and dark shadows under his eyes.

Seated in front of a desk, he unrolled a rice paper parchment and slowly sketched a plum tree. After he placed the brush down, he quietly contemplated it and, for whatever reason, picked up the brush and painted again. Soon, a silhouette of a girl with her back turned appeared behind the frosty plum tree. She seemed to be sniffing the plums, immersed in their fragrance.

Moxi admired the person in the painting while, at the same time, looking as though he wasn't seeing anything at all. Reaching out, his fingertips touched the ink that had yet to dry on the rice paper.

Chill traveled from his fingertips to his heart. He squeezed his eyes closed but couldn't suppress his cough. He abruptly bowed over, spewing a red blot onto the rice paper, its color as brilliant as the plum blossoms growing on the branches.

"Moxi!"

He fast opened his eyes at the sound of his name. A woman was sitting on the divan and carefully mending his clothes. "Moxi, why have your clothes torn so? Were you bullied? Did you fight back?"

Moxi stared dazedly, afraid to blink.

"Sansheng..."

Between the clanging of the watchman's gong outside the yard, the image flickered and dissolved in the wind.

Moxi got up to run after it, but his body did not listen to him. He fell forward, his sleeves knocking down the candle on the table.

Moxi paid no attention to the rolling candlelight. He couldn't contain the grief in his heart any second longer. Staring at the place where Sansheng disappeared, he whispered: "Who will stay up to mend my clothes from now on... Sansheng, who will stay up to mend my clothes?"

The flames caught onto the curtains. Watching the fire burn, Moxi did nothing but lightly smile.

...

The watchman went past the prime minister's courtyard. He went for two blocks, clanging his gong: "Be careful of fire." When he rounded the corner, he caught a glimpse of blazing light.

Above the prime minister's estate, a patch of sky was burning red.

Bonus Story 2: Forevermore (Moxi's Special Episode)

At the moment Moxi's soul drifted away from his mortal body, Wuqu Xingjun was already waiting in the air.

"Welcome back, My Lord. His Majesty has prepared a banquet to welcome your return."

With his memories of the past, the God of War did not feel any joy of returning from his trial. His ears were ringing with Sansheng's faint voice: "I like it just because I got to meet you."

Unable to control a sour warmth in his heart, he turned to gaze down the lower realm at a hollow and haggard girl who was holding a bloody 'Moxi' sitting on the battlefield. After ruminating for a long time, he asked, "Wuqu, where is Siming?"

Hearing the chill in Moxi's voice, Wuqu couldn't but shudder. "Siming... Siming..."

"Never mind, I shall look for her myself."

Wuqu hadn't time to plead before he suddenly heard a piercing laughter from the lower realm. The terrifying sound alarmed Wuqu. He looked to Sansheng sighingly: "It's rare to come across this smart of a spirit in the underworld. It's unfortunate that she will fall into darkness after this."

Moxi scowled, his body motionless. Wuqu quickly advised: "Your Lordship, you mustn't! You mustn't! This is the lower realm's matter, we cannot intervene!"

Making Wuqu break out in cold sweat, Moxi gave a slight glance in reply: "Did I say I will intervene?" Then he added: "I merely saw a mortal who is rather fated for divinity and would like to give him some counsel, that's all."

Wuqu wiped his perspiration as he watched Moxi 'counsel' a human named Chang'an. Wuqu couldn't but sigh inside. This wasn't a stone's

love trial; this love trial was clearly here to trial Heaven's God of War, too.

The loner God of War and the emotionless stone had fallen in love. The world must be coming to an end!

When the spirit of the spiritual being called Sansheng flew away, Wuqu saw Moxi stopping the judge coming from afar and giving him a pair of handcuffs. Even from a distance away, he could sense a circulating divine energy emanating from the handcuffs. Moxi told the judge a few words, to which the judge smiled knowingly.

Wuqu lowered his head in an attempt to look as though he didn't see anything. But when he saw the judge use them to cuff Sansheng, he couldn't resist saying: "My Lord, those handcuffs have a very strong divine energy. I don't think it's a good idea to use them on her."

Moxi did not answer him. He stared after the judge leading Sansheng away, a cryptic gleam sparking in his obsidian eyes. Finally, his gaze dropped to his hands, and he suddenly asked, "Wugu, how powerful are the forty-nine celestial bolts?"

Wuqu did not know what Moxi had meant. He incautiously replied: "Just one bolt has the power to shake Heaven and Earth. Forty-nine of them are naturally very powerful."

"Would you ever be willing to suffer those lightning bolts for something?"

Wuqu was quick to shake his head. "It's a punishment that would take away my life!"

Moxi faintly smiled. He clenched his fists, his soft voice almost whispering: "If I can have Sansheng in exchange, then I wouldn't mind." Wuqu didn't hear him very clearly, but before he could ask Moxi to repeat himself, Moxi was heard saying: "Wuqu, I can't go to the Celestial Emperor's banquet anymore. If he really wants to hold a feast for me, he can host my wedding the next time." At these words, his figure made a flash and vanished without waiting for Wuqu's reply.

Wuqu stood alone for a long time in the air, wanting desperately to cry but couldn't force out any tears.

The underworld.

Moxi went one step ahead of Sansheng to see Yanwang. At this time, Yanwang was having a headache over how to deal with Sansheng's matter. If he were lenient, he would not be following the laws, but if he were severe, it would be too harsh. Moxi stepped into the hall and lightly said three words: "Remove her heart."

Moxi's sudden appearance gave Yanwang a start. He hid under the table, stuttering in a shaky voice: "The... the hall's only gotten its floor re-tiled! Why are you here again?"

"Come out from there," uttered Moxi, coldly.

The scrawny Yanwang cautiously peeked out from under the table to look at Moxi and pitifully said, "Your Lordship! I don't want to sentence Sansheng either, but she had unfortunately gone well over the line this time. I... I really can't do anything about it."

"Of course she needs to be sentenced," Moxi said and then added: "Her sentence is to have her heart removed."

Yanwang dumbly looked at Moxi for a long time before faltering: "Isn't this... isn't this a little too light? No matter what, Sansheng has disrupted the order of the universe..."

"This will be fine. If the man upstairs has any rebukes, I shall face them for you. After Sansheng's heart is removed, you must hand it to me immediately."

Light footfalls were heard outside Yanwang's palace. It must be the escorting judge and Sansheng. Moxi hid behind a large column, not forgetting to quietly remind Yanwang: "Find a swift executioner. Do not let her suffer."

Sansheng walked in behind the judge. Her composed countenance was as it had always been whenever she chatted with Yanwang. When the underworld ruler announced: “Remove her heart,” Sansheng looked at him with a faint smile, knelt down and kowtowed. There were neither words of thanks nor dissatisfaction, only calm acceptance of her punishment.

After they left the hall, White Impermanence asked her, “Do you regret it?”

Hidden behind them, Moxi couldn’t help pausing when he heard this question.

“I have no regrets.”

Moxi gripped his fist, the light in his eyes swirling, as he tried to suppress the impulse to go out and pull her in for a hug. If ‘no regrets’ was her answer, Moxi thought, then they must take care to never have any regrets in the future.

Moxi took Sansheng’s heart from the messenger ghost, carefully held it in his hands, and protected it with his divine energy.

He looked to the distance where he saw Sansheng clutching her chest and slowly crawling into the Sansheng Stone with difficulty. After thousands of years, a rare storm was brewing in his heart which had long been lulled into stillness. A dull pain. He murmured: *just bear with it, just bear with it*. It’s unclear whether he was telling Sansheng to bear with it or telling himself to bear with it.

Once he was back in Heaven, the first place Moxi went to was the Soul Rinsing Tower.

There was a heavenly treasure on the Soul Rinsing Tower called the Soul Rinser that could cleanse all the souls in this world. Be they demons or ghosts, when their hearts passed through this treasure, their miasma would obliterate and they would immediately become no different from mere mortals.

Moxi raised Sansheng's heart and placed it before the Soul Rinser. After a slight quiver, the living heart became no different from an ordinary stone. Moxi smiled as he happily took the stone back to Victory Palace.

Words in Heaven spread that the God of War Moxi was becoming increasingly reclusive after returning from his trial. Not only did he decline the Celestial Emperor's welcoming feast, he stayed all day behind closed doors and even turned away the gods who came to visit, all of whom were good friends of his in the past.

While everyone was busy talking about this deity, lightning suddenly struck Victory Palace.

The thunder clapping wasn't low. Forty-nine lightning bolts fell straight onto the God of War's palace, shaking so much that half of Heaven rattled thrice. The stunned Celestial Emperor rushed out in the middle of the night. All he saw was that Victory Palace was burning red and that the bloodied God of War was engulfed in fire while clutching something in his hands. His face was bleeding horribly but there was a gentlest smile on his lips.

None had ever seen the God of War looking this way. The gods stared at him. For the time being, no one dared to step forward to lend him a hand.

In the end, Siming Xingjun was the first to react. She led Wuqu to go rescue Moxi from the scorching flames. By the time they saw what Moxi was holding in his hands, Siming couldn't but gasp: "You... you... you're trying to help her change her fate."

When the gods heard Siming's exclamation, they looked to the thing Moxi was holding. It was Sansheng's heart. At this time, it had become a mass of shimmering object. Coldness no longer occupied it, and all the miasma was also gone, leaving only an air of awe-spining divine glory, like that of red plums blossoming in the midst of winter, standing proudly among snow and ice.

The Celestial Emperor's eyes darkened as he growled: "Nonsense! Changing fate against Heaven's will is a sin that causes disruption to the world! Do you really think you don't have to fear Heaven's retribution just because you're a god?"

Realization only now dawned on Wuqu. No wonder His Lordship wanted to make Sansheng wear those handcuffs. No wonder he wanted to remove Sansheng's heart. No wonder he inquired about the forty-nine lightning bolts. It turned out he had long planned for tomorrow.

He handcuffed Sansheng so that divine energy would dispel the dark forces inside of her. He removed her heart and brought it to Heaven so that he could completely change her fate. He was punished by forty-nine lightning bolts for changing Destiny on his own. He had planned everything without letting anyone know, paying the full price by himself.

Moxi quietly put her heart away and said to the Celestial Emperor: "In a few days, I will take a trip to the underworld. Last time you had prepared a welcoming banquet for me but I did not go. This time, please prepare a wedding feast for me. I won't miss the date."

The Celestial Emperor gave him a long glare. "You've made your life so difficult for that Sansheng Stone. Is she worth it?"

"Even knowing she would lose her soul, she still committed murder for my sake. What's to prevent me from suffering these trivial forty-nine lightning bolts for her?"

"You are bent on marrying a spirit from the underworld?"

Moxi shook his head: "She is now a fairy."

The Celestial Emperor sighed: "There are no shortage of better women in Heaven. Why must you insist on loving that stone?"

Moxi suddenly thought of what Sansheng said to White Impermanence last time. He laughed: "I'm left with little choice now that I've met her."

The gods were all silent. The Celestial Emperor gazed at the raging fire in Victory Palace for a long while before finally walking away, leaving only one line: “If that’s what you both want, then let me not be the one standing in your way.”

Moxi dropped his gaze. Even though he was covered in blood, the gods could see an unbridled joy in his smile.

Sansheng, Sansheng...

I can finally give you forever.

Bonus Story 3: The Death of Siming Xingjun

Siming was dead.

Well, not really dead. She just accidentally fell from the Suxian Terrace and went into a deep sleep.

Under the Suxian Terrace was the Jade Pond. Filled inside the Jade Pond was an extremely fragrant yet at the same time extremely intoxicating ten-thousand-year-old wine. Even a god would go to sleep for thousands of years if he happened to have too much to drink.

Not only did Siming Xingjun fall all the way inside, the entire celestial realm knew she was also a landlubber. Once she fell, unless she drank until her eyes popped white, she would never be able to float on her own. For this reason, by the time the gatekeeper found Siming ‘drowning in wine’ and labored to pull her ashore, Siming was already passed out from the wine foam.

After the old doctor checked Siming’s pulse, he surmised her waking up would be a matter of six or seven thousand years later.

Six or seven thousand years for the undying immortals wasn’t a long time. However, Siming managed fates in the three realms as the God of Fate. She was also responsible for writing tribulations for those going through trials. Hers was the most critical out of all the critical positions. The three realms couldn’t have one day without Siming Xingjun, let alone six or seven thousand years.

The gods couldn’t but panic and blame Siming for being careless. Amid the frenzy dismay, a maidservant quietly pointed out that she had seen Siming with Lord Moxi’s new wife, Sansheng, before she fell into the pond. The two of them even appeared to have had a dispute.

Once she said this, everyone went hushed for a moment. You looked at me, I looked at you, but no one dared to stand up and say it aloud.

The God of War was generally a very fair and just god. He was, however, terribly protective of his wife, Sansheng, and no one could dream to say a bad thing about her.

The stiff atmosphere was finally broken at long last by the Crane Fairy who was sent by the Celestial Emperor.

“What are we going to do about this? Will you just let Siming Xingjun lie on the ground? Why haven’t you helped bring her back?! Are the lot of you all blind?” The Crane Fairy yelled at the maidservants standing by the Jade Pond for a length before demanding: “Why is Siming this drunk? When was the last time anyone slipped and fell into the Jade Pond?”

The crowd dithered for a long while. Only the maidservant repeated what she said.

The Crane Fairy gave her words a listen and briefly fell silent. “If that is the case, why not go and confront Sansheng?”

No one moved.

The Crane Fairy growled icily: “Don’t tell me you are all afraid of her?” Then he flapped his sleeves peevishly and left.

The God of War’s palace was surrounded by plum trees in a ten-mile radius. Magic had been used to create a frosty winter where red plum stood proudly in the snow. Ten miles of plum blossoms scented the air with ten miles of fragrance, rendering the God of War’s palace somewhat less solemn and adding some traces of elegance to it.

The Crane Fairy walked through the sea of plum blossoms to enter the God of War’s home. When a maid informed him that the God of War and his wife were enjoying the plum blossoms in the back, he glowered and had the maid lead the way.

Yet to step foot into the back garden, he suddenly heard a woman’s voice speaking: “Moxi, don’t move. I’m almost finished with the drawing. Just let me place a bit of color onto your lips.”

A sigh preceded a man's deep voice: "Sansheng, what you're drawing is my back."

"Yes, that's right."

"So how can you see any lips?"

"I can't," the woman said as-a-matter-of-factly. "But that doesn't matter. I want to see your face."

The Crane Fairy briefly pondered to himself, unable to imagine how horrifying the painting would be if one could see his face even though she was drawing his back. He waited for the maid to send word and then stepped into the main hall.



The scene he saw gave the Crane Fairy a scare. The usually icy and solemn Lord Moxi was holding onto a plum tree at this time. He stood under the red flowers, lifting one as if to savor its soft fragrance. His serene and gentle expression was something the Crane Fairy had never seen before. Not far away, his wife Sansheng, whose appalling face was inked all over, was busy painting on the paper parchment.

Seeing him coming in, she carelessly gave her face two wipes and, in the process, smeared it even more tragically. She placed her brush down and said, "Moxi, welcome your guest."

The veins on the Crane Fairy's forehead twitched.

The solemn master of the house actually listened to this woman and unhurriedly came over, saying without a change in his expression: "To what do we owe the honor of your visit today, Crane Fairy?"

The Crane Fairy bowed to Moxi and replied: "My Lord, you may not have heard. Siming Xingjun carelessly slipped and fell into the Jade Pond today. She drank too much wine and is out cold at this time. The doctor said she will stay asleep for at least six or seven millennia."

Moxi nodded his head: "That's really too careless of Siming."

"However, there was a maidservant who saw Lady Sansheng with Siming Xingjun, and that they also seemed to have been in a quarrel."

Moxi walked over to Sansheng to help her rub the ink from her face with his sleeves while lightly replying: "She must've been mistaken. Sansheng has been with me the entire day." Sansheng grabbed Moxi's sleeves and buried her face onto his shoulder, rubbing messily. Moxi obviously wouldn't stop her intimate action; he happily let her dirty his clothes with her careless rubbing.

The Crane Fairy watched the lovey dovey pair for a moment, his mouth twitching into a reluctant smile. "If Your Lordship says so, then the young fairy must've seen wrong. My apologies, Lady Sansheng. Goodbye."

“Please wait,” Moxi suddenly called after the Crane Fairy. “If Siming has to stay asleep for several thousand years, who will take over her position?”

“His Majesty will have his arrangements.”

“Ah yes. Will you relay to His Majesty for me, envoy, that my wife Sansheng is quite fond of reading? She has many great ideas that I’m sure her fate writing won’t be any inferior compared to Siming’s.”

Surprise flashed in the Crane Fairy’s eyes. He gave Sansheng a quick glance and then said, “I’ll keep that in mind. I’ll be sure to pass your words to His Majesty.”

After the Crane Fairy went far away, Sansheng raised her head from Moxi’s chest with amusement dancing in her eyes: “I can’t believe it. I can’t believe you’d lie so blatantly just to get out of trouble.”

Moxi ruffled the hair on Sansheng’s forehead and said with a faint smile: “How can you still make fun of me? If you weren’t arguing with her so heatedly, would I have let her trip and fall like that?”

Sansheng sighed: “I feel kind of bad. It was just a small quarrel but I’ve made her sleep for thousands of years.”

Moxi chuckled. “Sansheng, do you really think there’s a god who’s that stupid? With Siming’s ability, how could she have fallen down the Jade Pond from my ploy?”

“She wanted to fall? But why?”

Moxi looked in the direction of the Celestial Emperor’s residence: “I heard that Siming confessed to the Celestial Emperor a few days ago.”

“Siming likes the Celestial Emperor?!” Sansheng asked in shock.

Moxi’s lips smirked into a smile. “You’ll know all these stories in Heaven once you’re here long enough. The Celestial Emperor seemed to

have rejected Siming's confession – it was quite a blow... She's fairly close to me, so I have some idea about how she feels."

"How does she feel?"

"Siming's a girl who loves her freedom. She's long been sick and tired of her job. She only remains in Heaven because of her feelings for the Celestial Emperor. Now that her hope has shattered, I'm sure she'd want to find a way to leave this post. After thousands of drunken years, the human world would change, and this post would also be replaced by someone else by then. She'll naturally be freed."

Sansheng nodded despite being somewhat puzzled. She mulled for a while and then looked up to Moxi: "If Siming dislikes that position so much, then doesn't that mean there's nothing good about it? Why do you still want to push me down this minefield?"

Moxi did not speak for a time. "Why were you fighting with Siming?"

At the mention of which, Sansheng became incensed. She left her original question behind. "Moxi, do you still remember Chang'an?" At Moxi's nod, Sansheng excitedly said, "Today, I saw Siming writing trials for fairies who are ascending to the heavenly realm. I walked over to take a look and happened to see Changan's name. He has been successful in his cultivation and will soon ascend to immortality."

"Oh," Moxi indifferently replied while turning around to look at the painting Sansheng had painted, none too happy to hear her speak to him about another man in so passionate a fashion.

Sansheng paid little attention to Moxi's dissatisfaction, continuing instead: "This is a good thing, I was also very happy about it. But then Siming told me she had written a love trial for Chang'an wherein Chang'an was to fall in love with an old and dying Bai Jiu and experience a painful unrequited love!"

Moxi nodded, unsurprised. This was exactly something Siming would do.

Sansheng furiously slammed her palm onto the table. “Bai Jiu is our enemy! How could she let Chang’an fall in love with that piece of shit?”

Our, she said this word so naturally that Moxi’s mood lifted. His gaze fell on Sansheng as he warmly asked, “So what do you want?”

“We mustn’t let Bai Jiu have such a yummy treat! Chang’an is such a delectable boy. If someone were to eat him, I’d have to have the first taste...”

A dangerous ray sparked in Moxi’s eyes. Sansheng diverted her eyes and corrected herself: “If someone were to eat him, he’d have to ask me first! And then I remembered that Chang’an has a senior, so I proposed to Siming to let Chang’an and that Changwu kid have a love line. Wouldn’t that have been great? But Siming said that wouldn’t be considered a trial, which was why I ended up arguing with her.” Sansheng sighingly shook her head: “I can’t believe Siming’s mind could turn so fast. She could even come up with that strategy at the same time she was quarreling with me.”

After he pondered for a moment about everything that had happened, Moxi suddenly pointed out the forgotten crux: “What was ultimately decided for Chang’an’s trial?”

Sansheng went quiet for a moment. “The sheet of paper might have been dragged into the Jade Pond with Siming...”

Sighing, Moxi massaged his brow and said, “Ascending to immortality is only supposed to be a minor trial, but you two had now left it to Heaven’s will. If one is able to cross a heavenly trial, he will become immortalized, but should he fail, he will fall into darkness. Sansheng, this joke’s gone a bit too far.”

Dismayed, Sansheng blinked back her tears and asked pitifully: “Moxi, will I be punished?”

Whatever frustration he may have had vanished at that moment under her gaze. Moxi softly chuckled and patted Sansheng’s head: “No, you have me.”

Sansheng had waited for Moxi to say this, but when Moxi really did, she was caught in a stupor. She wiped her tears and poked Moxi's chest accusingly: "Moxi, if you indulge me like this, I'm going to be spoiled."

Moxi's fingertips gently brushed her cheek: "It's fine for my Sansheng to be spoiled."

All Sansheng could do was to gaze at Moxi in a trance.

When the muted fragrance of the plum blossoms drifted across her nose, Sansheng suddenly ruined the mood: "Why do you want me to be the God of Fate?"

Moxi blinked, then broke into a smile. "Still won't let this go, I see. But it is precisely this rock-headed temperament that I love so much." After muttering to himself, Moxi softly asked his wife: "Sansheng, do you think I'll be able to see you as my everything from now on?"

Sansheng shook her head.

She had always known Moxi to have his own aspirations and ideals. Nothing could be his everything. But this was the Moxi that she loved. From the very beginning, what she loved was the proud confidence with which he had marched to the Yellow Springs.

"In Jiuchongtian, I have numerous responsibilities as the God of War," he began. "But Sansheng, you've given up the underworld for me. You've thrown away everything you knew to come to Heaven. You have nothing now except for me."

Sansheng mulled over his words and was reminded how much she had had to sacrifice to marry Moxi. Suddenly perceiving her own magnanimity, she patted Moxi's shoulder, saying: "You have to treat me well, then!"

Both exasperated and amused, Moxi held Sansheng's hand and continued what he was saying: "But that's not what I want. With your personality, your life shouldn't revolve around me. I found Siming's post for you to firstly allow you to quickly integrate into the circle of the

gods and at the same time to gain a foothold in Heaven. Secondly... if and when I'm not around anymore, I want you to live well in this place."

Sansheng gave Moxi's words some careful consideration and then said, "You're right, I really should find something to do. But if one day you were gone, I would definitely accompany you home."

Moxi ruffled Sansheng's hair and gently smiled. "Your hair has grown a bit longer again."

"Really? The water in Heaven must be great for nourishing hair! Before long, I'll be able to grow tresses even longer than Siming's."

"I'm sure you will."

"Moxi, let's go visit Siming."

"Let me see the portrait you painted for me first."

"Umm... Let's go visit Siming first."

"Let's look at the painting!"

"Moxi, I'm trying to wheedle you!"

"..."

"C'mon! Let's go see Siming."

Red plum branches swayed in the breeze, infusing the air with a subtle fragrance and lining the smiling faces of the couple in the garden like a beautiful tranquil painting.

-END- (for real this time)

